Autism in the Workplace

Identifying Employment Opportunities and Providing Support

By Raul Jimenez II, MST and Amy Greenberg, BA
New Frontiers in Learning

Between 1997 and 2011, the unemployment rate of those diagnosed with disabilities has ranged from 72% to 88%. This is an astounding number of persons with disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), specifically, without a job. Despite the enthusiasm, motivation, and dependability so many job seekers with ASD have in their will to work, many workplaces are hesitant to take the risk to support them, or lack the knowledge on how to support them in an employment setting. Supported employment is the opportunity for individuals with disabilities to be integrated in a working environment with the necessary supports to be successful. “The purpose of supported employment is to assist individuals with disabilities in becoming and remaining competitively employed in integrated work settings” (Wehman, Revell & Brooke, 2003, p. 167).

Employment for Persons on the Autism Spectrum: Examination of the State of the Field and the Path to Pursue

By Dianne Zager, PhD, Colleen A. Thoma, PhD, and Samuel M. Fleisher, EdD

Despite evidence of the potential of individuals with autism to perform competitive jobs, employment rates for people on the spectrum remain extremely poor. Approximately 75% of adults with autism are unemployed or underemployed (Autism Society, 2011; Van Laarhoven & Winiask, 2012). In 2013, the U.S. Department of Labor (2014) reported unemployment for people with disabilities at 11.9%, with labor force participation for people with disabilities at 18.7%. In fact, only 6% of individuals with autism are actively employed (Shattuck, Wagner, Narendorf, Sterzing, & Hensley, 2011). In an analysis of nationally representative data, Shattuck et al. (2012) reported that in the eight years following high school only 53% of individuals with autism had worked for pay. Adult care and lost productivity from unemployment of individuals with autism have resulted in substantial costs to society. The annual cost for caring for the 1.5 million people in the U.S. with autism has been estimated from $35 billion to $60 billion (Autism Society, 2011), with the lifetime cost to care for a person with autism at $3.2 million. Two-thirds of these costs occur after the age of 18 and are directly related to unemployment.

Unemployment rates for people with autism are significantly higher than for other disability categories because they face a disproportionately difficult time navigating work due to their unique cognitive, communication and behavior challenges. Individuals with autism have markedly different vocational needs than individuals with other disabilities. Cimera and Cowan (2009) reported that adults with autism were more likely than adults with other impairments to be denied services because of the magnitude of their needs, which require a greater amount of services. Due to communication, cognitive, behavioral, and social needs that require intensive services and result in greater cost, they are less likely to obtain competitive employment.

There has been limited research and insufficient evidence to support the effectiveness of any particular vocational treatment approach for adults with autism, resulting in service delivery that is fraught with widespread lack of understanding of the employment support needs of this population. Only a fraction of research articles about autism have examined accessibility to employment support. The current lack of knowledge within the vocational rehabilitation (VR) system pertaining to employment interventions for people with autism (Standifer, 2009), which has created a severe problem in meeting their needs. Mülner, Schuler, Burton, and Yates (2003) reported widespread lack of adequate training, found VR services were not meeting the needs of this population, and stressed the need for better trained vocational service providers. Their findings indicated that counselors often lacked the training and background to assist persons with autism to obtain compatible employment. The lack of expertise in helping individuals with autism find and maintain work in the face of their unique challenges has contributed to persistent high rates of unemployment (Lawler, Brueliovic, Salzer, & Mandel, 2009), which has resulted in a critical problem that is negatively affecting employment outcomes. Given the
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Jewish Child Care Association’s Compass Project helps young adults with special needs identify career and educational directions and foster friendships through socialization programs. It also encourages participants to pursue their dreams. Compass staff helps clients develop job readiness skills, assists with job development and provides skillful coaching to prepare them for competitive employment and ensure their success in the workplace. “We are very pleased to see the progress of our clients,” says Elise Hahn Felix, Director of the Compass Project. “And one of the special benefits is to see that many of our employers gain insight and learn from the experience as well.”

Jewish Child Care Association is a major nonprofit organization helping vulnerable children and families of all backgrounds. Here are some of their stories:

Freddy and Bryan work at Somerset Gardens in Plainview, which is an assisted living facility, and a subsidiary of Chelsea Gardens. Last year Freddy and Bryan received vocational support at Compass. They did not have prior job experience but they wanted to work. According to Shari Abel Saunders, Compass Job Development Coordinator, “We assessed their skills, interests and abilities and thought they would be well-suited to work at Somerset Gardens.” Their jobs were to assist the residents with such daily activities as Bingo, exercise classes, sing-alongs and dance. Paul Wasser, the Executive Director of Somerset, provides a nurturing, supportive workplace environment that enables the clients to build on their skills and gain confidence. He says, “My goal is to benefit the residents and staff. I see how they have added a spark and a positive dynamic to the recreation team. And aside from the business and health care decisions I am required to make on a daily basis, working with JCCA and the Compass Project has been one of the best decisions I have made for the company.”

“This is key,” states Elise Hahn Felix. “Leadership and support from the top set the tone for the other staff.”

Bryan did so well that after two months, Debbie Sweithelm, Recreation Director, offered him a part-time paid job. Bryan remarks, “It’s so great. I get to come to work each day at a place where I already made friends and I feel part of the team. I am glad when I can put a smile on someone’s face.” Debbie continues, “These young men started off first as volunteer interns with stipends and have now become employees, making a contribution to our community. Work should not only be simply a way of earning income, but working to make a difference, and at the end of the day, making your place in this world.”

Recently, a family member of a resident who had just moved into Somerset was so appreciative of how Freddy took the time to ensure her parent was well cared for, she praised Freddy’s kindness on what could have been a stressful day for the whole family.

Restoration Farm

Restoration Farm, a beautiful family-run organic farm which operates as a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) in Old Bethpage, New York has had many interns from Compass over the last several years. Husband and wife, Dan and Caroline Holmes, also have created a warm and welcoming environment in which Compass

see Teach on page 33
E nvisioning and then creating innovative employment opportunities for adults living with Autism has always been a hallmark of The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation’s mission. Last spring, while attending a performance by participants from The Miracle Project New York, the seeds of another new inspiration were planted.

The Miracle Project New York group wrote a funny, satirical original song about their hectic hometown entitled “NYC Overload.” The big-band Broadway style musical arrangement is about sensory overload (experienced by many on the autism spectrum) and the sights, sounds, smells (rats, pigeons, honking taxis, pizza pies) of NYC! After I saw the performance I thought that this song would be a great way to enhance awareness. I also felt that we could create a first-ever (to my knowledge) opportunity for these singer/songwriters to professionally record their song and get paid for doing so.

“This catchy song also promotes an understanding about the sensory issues many individuals living with Autism experience and find challenging as they engage in community life,” says Vicki Ofmani, a member of The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation Board of Trustees.

The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation was established over a dozen years ago as the first Autism organization in the United States to focus exclusively on adults. Since then it has pioneered opportunities relating to all aspects of adult life and has developed many work experiences in the arts including pop-up art galleries run by people on the spectrum, art studio employment, musical theater programs, and art mentorship programs that benefit adults living with Autism.

Says Ofmani, “Now The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation has opened another door so that singers and songwriters on the spectrum can record their original music and get paid for it by hopefully sell the CD that is being produced.”

Elaine Hall, founder of the Miracle Project, hopes to get celebrities engaged in the project for its next phase, including a group of Broadway stars. “It would be wonderful to add celebrity voices to create and even more professional recording that hopefully will lead to more awareness and support,” says Hall. Stayed tuned for this…

The Miracle Project is a fully inclusive musical theater program for children, teens, and adults of all abilities. Through shared creative experiences with typically developing siblings and peers, those with autism and other disabilities grow in confidence and self-esteem; those without disabilities grow in compassion and understanding. Together they create an original musical.

The Miracle Project is the subject of the two-time Emmy award winning HBO documentary “Autism: The Musical,” which has been shown all over the world.

The Miracle Project has received hundreds of requests to replicate it in other communities. The Miracle Project NYC is directed by Aaron Feinstein, who worked with the students to create “NYC Overload.” “We were able to get professional musicians to donate their talent to record the track and the adults in our program were over the moon about recording live in a studio and getting paid as working singer/songwriters.”

see NYC Overload on page 35
Presenting Yourself at the Interview

By Yvona Fast, MLS
Author and Advocate

The employer liked your resume! You have been selected for an interview. You are excited but nervous because you know that often it’s often the candidate who interviews best, not the one with the best qualifications, who gets the job offer. Your goal is to persuade the buyer that you are the best fit for the job they’re trying to fill. Nowhere is this more important than at the interview.

Interviews screen out those who don’t fit into the corporate culture. You are being judged on qualities like attitude, appearance, confidence, personality, conviviality. This is also your chance to check whether this organization is where you want to use your talents. Does the job fulfill your expectations? Are you compatible with the organization and the other employees?

Body Language

For spectrum individuals, issues with nonverbal communication and body language often cause problems projecting confidence. Their lack of eye contact sets off warning flags in the interviewer’s mind. He thinks, “Boy, I can’t quite place my finger on it, but that guy is weird.”

Remember to smile. Believe it or not, that makes a big difference. It makes you look self-confident, well-adjusted and happy to be there. Often the interviewer will make their judgment about the applicant during the first thirty seconds.

Dress neatly. Take care of personal grooming. Suck on a mint before your interview to make sure your breath is fresh. Try to greet people at the beginning and end the interview with a handshake.

Look at your interviewer. If you have trouble looking in the eyes, look at his nose. Eye contact shows the interviewer you are still on the same page. To avoid staring, remember to look away occasionally. nod your head at appropriate times to show you are listening. Don’t interrupt, but listen till the speaker is finished. In this way, you can gather important information that will help you formulate better answers and ask intelligent questions.

Avoid sofas or plush chairs. Sit up straight and keep your feet flat on the floor. To convey your interest, lean forward slightly towards the person you are interviewing with. Keep your hands in your lap, unless you are taking notes. Don’t fold your arms; this is perceived as defensive or inaccessible. If you take notes, be sure you can about interview and negotiation skills. The more you know about the process, the more comfortable you’ll be, and the more confidence you will exude.

With a friend, teacher, or mentor, practice body language. What’s your handshake like? It should be firm but not aggressive. Practice your answers to common interview questions. Tape record your answers, and listen for what you sound like. Pay special attention to the tone and volume of your voice.

Use self-talk to build confidence. In your home or car, before you go into an interview, tell yourself out loud why you deserve to get this job. This will help you to act with confidence even when you don’t feel like it. If you believe it, so will the person you are interviewing with.

Questions, Questions…

There are a million questions that the interviewer could ask you, so it’s hard to be prepared for everything. But lists of common questions abound. Prepare for these. If you are asked a question that trips you up, don’t be afraid to pause and think about it. You might even use a phrase like, “That’s an interesting concept. Let me think about that,” to give yourself time to digest the question. If you can’t think of an answer, it’s OK to say so. You can think of ideas and answer in a follow-up letter.

Learn the difference between qualifying questions and those meant to disqualify.

Preparation is Your Best Friend

There is much you can do beforehand to make sure you make as good an impression as possible. Interview skills can be learned and practiced. Take classes and seminars in interpersonal communications, public speaking, and presentation skills. Learn all you can about interview and negotiation skills. The more you know about the process, the more comfortable you’ll be, and the more confidence you will exude.

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If you have habits others may find annoying, like rocking or shaking your leg, be aware of them and make sure they don’t crop up.

If the interviewer starts shuffling papers or says something like, “We have a million other candidates to interview,” that is your clue he/she wants to wrap up. Acknowledge that you realize time is about up. If you haven’t gotten a chance to ask your questions, do so now but make them brief. End by asking what part of your background they would like to hear more about.

Know yourself - your skills, talents, abilities, personal traits. List your accomplishments. Show the employer how your skills and abilities you bring will solve his or her problems and contribute to the organization.

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An Employer’s Perspective on the Benefits of Training People with Autism

By Nadia Haque
Operations Analyst
NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital Westchester Division

As part of its clinical mission, NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital/Westchester Division (NYP/WD) cares for patients so they are prepared to return to their home communities to lead productive lives. To successfully achieve this, patients are given the necessary tools to be able to work and live. In keeping with this mission, NYP/WD was pleased when approached by New York Collaborates for Autism to participate in a high school to employment transition program for young adults with autism spectrum disorder called Project SEARCH Collaborates for Autism (PSCA). PSCA was created by New York Collaborates for Autism in partnership with NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital (NYPH), ARC of Westchester and Southern Westchester BOCES (SW BOCES). Now in its third year on our campus, we have discovered that employees gain as much from this partnership as the interns.

With our numerous clinical and non-clinical departments, NYP/WD is an ideal location to host this training program and expose interns to many different work environments so that they can explore a variety of career paths. The student interns are evaluated for their independent employment and skills. Once determined, they receive classroom training from Southern Westchester BOCES, and job coaches from ARC of Westchester work with them on expectations, rules, and skills of a work environment. When the interns arrive at the job site, they receive additional practical, area-specific training. Interns work in departments as varied as Pharmacy, Lab Services, Building Services, Plant Operations, Paint shop, Storeroom, Upholstery shop, Grounds and Landscaping, and Food and Nutrition. These are valuable and diverse opportunities for our interns, and they participate in 3 ten-week long rotations under the close supervision of our department directors and designated staff.

The focus of our interns’ work experience is on non-traditional jobs, which are not the easiest to perform, and are complex and systematic in nature. We strive to give them marketable skills. As such, our interns learn to perform tasks such as system updates, computer configuration, courier/delivery services, supply stocking, medication sorting, preparing labels for medication storage bins, inventory recording, taking lab orders, and creating lab/pharmacy packages. They are closely guided, coached and supervised by the department staff, in addition to the mentoring they receive from their classroom instructors and job coaches. They are also coached on building communication, teamwork and collaboration skills which are essential for future employment.

The benefits of having a Project SEARCH intern are quickly apparent. While each individual with autism is unique, our interns have proven to be task oriented, independent, highly motivated, punctual in attendance, and team players. They are eager to perform repetitive, step-by-step job responsibilities requiring time and patience that staff often finds tedious and time consuming. In addition, the interns are incredibly accurate when performing their assigned tasks. In their experience with the interns, staff noted the interns’ strong work ethic and desire to complete assigned duties.

While the program’s goal is to increase marketable skills for the interns, staff report receiving their own benefits from the program. Through meetings and surveys, participating managers and directors stress the value that individuals with autism bring to their department. Because of the individualized needs and concerns of each intern, staff needs to work as a team to make the internship successful, thereby resulting in greater collaboration amongst one another. In one department, the interns needed checklists to assist them through step-by-step tasks. Once staff saw how useful the checklists were for the interns, they are now used by the entire department, with the unexpected benefit of improved efficiency and accuracy.

By working in a real work site, managers have identified areas where the interns need additional support. While the interns are able to accomplish the assigned tasks, their social skills are lacking and they hesitate to ask for help. Staff continues to work with the job coaches on these areas.

see Training on page 38
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My name is Jay Mikush, and I am 23 years old. When I was first diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) at the age of six, I had many challenges interacting with other children. Over the years, I have learned how to be more social with all sorts of people.

I am proud to have been born and raised in wonderful Winston-Salem, North Carolina. After I graduated from high school, I enrolled in the College Internship Program’s (CIP) Brevard Center, a post-high school program for young adults with AS and other learning differences. During this time I also attended Brevard Community College in Melbourne, Florida where I learned how to live independently.

After I graduated from high school, I found out about CIP and its services from my parents. At first, I was not terribly interested in going because I could not imagine being away from home. However, when I arrived and got used to being away from home and knowing everyone and how the program worked, I got accustomed to it and realized it was a helpful environment to live in. I had many friends at Brevard and I participated in a variety of activities, including bowling and going to the beach.

Social Skills

If I were to choose one of the most critical skills that I improved upon within the last few years, it would be social skills. I had the biggest issue with not being able to say “no” to peer pressure. This occurred mostly in high school where it caused me to get in a lot of trouble with my friends, which I now identify for what they really are—enemies. Now I am able to say “no” in potentially dangerous situations.

I have made a lot of friends through the iCan House (www.icanhouse.org), a place for young adults with AS and social challenges in Winston-Salem, where I do many things with friends in my spare time such as visiting amusement parks, going to movies, biking, swimming, attending the local fair, bowling, mini golfing, and much more. I also keep in touch with peers from CIP in the Melbourne area through social media such as Skype and Facebook.

Independent Living Skills

After attending CIP, I moved back to North Carolina, and I now live in my own apartment with a roommate. I am working with a life coach from the iCan House who is helping me with budgeting, cooking, and other skills. I feel that I have improved in the financial area because I do not spend as much on things that I want, such as a $100 iTunes gift card. I generally focus on things that I need such as groceries or gas. Now I am much more cautious with spending my money.

Job Skills

I have a job coach from a service called Vocational Rehabilitation who is assisting me in seeking a full-time career in the aviation industry once I complete my associate’s degree in aviation management.

DJ

I own and operate a professional mobile DJ (disc jockey) business and do many types of parties and events throughout the city, county, and state. My long-term goal
Join Pace University’s Ongoing Academic and Social Instructional Support (OASIS) Program and Strokes of Genius for an inspiring lecture on how to train the talent in artistic individuals with autism. Guest lecturer Temple Grandin, PhD, one of the most accomplished and well-known adults with autism in the world, will deliver the keynote address. Rosa C. Martinez, PhD, BCBA-D, president and founder of Strokes of Genius, will also discuss how to help autistic artists realize their talents.

Artwork by individuals with autism will be on display* and available for purchase. A special art auction and VIP reception with Grandin and the artists will help fund the OASIS and Strokes of Genius programs. All proceeds from the auction will go to Strokes of Genius and OASIS Program for students on the autistic spectrum.

Wednesday, April 16, 2014
Art auction and VIP reception: 6:00 p.m.
Temple Grandin lecture: 7:30 p.m.

Pace University
Michael Schimmel Center for the Arts
3 Spruce Street
New York, NY 10038

*Artwork will be on display for public viewing April 14–20.
Strokes of Genius develops artistic talents through professional art studio experiences and workshops to “Train the Talent.” Directed by Mary Riggs Cohen, PhD, The Ongoing Academic and Social Instructional Support (OASIS) Program at Pace University provides a comprehensive college support program for students with autism, Asperger Syndrome, learning differences, and related challenges.

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MassMutual Financial Group of Westchester is a proud Gold Sponsor of this event.
Finding Positive Vocational Opportunities for Young Adults on the Spectrum

By Terri White, MPS
Director of Vocational Services
New York Institute of Technology

E ach year 50,000 students on the autism spectrum reach 18 years of age. They are at a crossroads. Should they continue their education at their high school? Is pursuing a two or four-year college degree an appropriate pathway to the world of work and independent living? Or should they enroll in a vocational program to receive job specific training? Many are not ready to enroll in a degree bearing program or a vocational certificate program. Those that are not quite ready to move into either the world of work or higher education may consider a transition program.

Without some sort of intervention, the employment statistics for students on the autism spectrum are rather grim. Most of these numbers are anecdotal in nature. The highest employment rates from these reports are somewhere around 34% to 56% (Howlin, Goode, Hutton, & Rutter, 2004; Eaves & Ho; 2008). Other reports suggest that these numbers are anecdotal in nature.

For more information, call 631.348.3354

see Vocational on page 31
ABA / Autism Insurance Coverage: Mandates and Self-Insured Companies

By Bryan Davey, PhD, BCBA-D
President, Highland Behavioral
Chief Clinical Officer, Ensure Billing

Let me start out by saying that I am trained as a Behavior Analyst. Following my coursework and practicum experience, I had a solid foundation to begin my career working with individuals with various diagnoses, including Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). My training however was focused, and rightfully so, on the principles and procedures that define Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). I was not trained in public policy, insurance mandates, issues related to professional licensure, how insurance carriers operate with respect to ABA, or how to file a claim for reimbursement.

In 2001 and 2007, Indiana and South Carolina became the first states to pass meaningful Autism insurance reform. Fast forward to 2014, and thanks to the efforts of advocacy groups, parents, and professionals, 34 states and the District of Columbia have adopted Autism insurance reform. These reforms in one way or another include ABA as a covered benefit for specific state regulated health plans. Further, over this same time frame many self-insured companies have adopted ABA and ASD coverage. Based on this movement, behavior analytic practitioners were thrust, willingly in most cases, into a realm that they were not familiar with.

I, along with several of my colleagues across the nation, spend considerable amounts of time attempting to understand the realities of life after insurance reform, not to mention the potential impact of the Affordable Care Act. What is clear at this point is that each state is unique. Some states pass legislation without annual dollar limits (e.g., Alaska, California, Massachusetts), while other states have dollar limits based on age (e.g., Arizona, Missouri, Delaware). Some states have age limits (e.g., Kansas, Louisiana, Rhode Island) and others do not (New York, Oregon, Wisconsin). For the state reforms that define ASD and/or ABA as a behavioral health benefit, and subsequently impose age limits and monetary caps on treatment, carriers are pressed to understand how the mental health parity law will be interpreted and enforced by state insurance regulators. Further, each state’s reforms may or may not impact large and small group plans or state employees. Finally, no state-based reform directly impacts self-insured companies.

Self-insured companies are governed by the Federal Employee Retirement Income Security Act, or ERISA as it is commonly known. This means that state reforms do not typically impact the plans offered by these companies. The premise of being self-insured is that the company funds its healthcare cost from within, so when deciding to add any benefits they are sensitive to cost increases. One interesting phenomenon in the self-insured research, is the data reported by Center for Disease Controls (CDC) that 1 in 88 children are affected by an ASD. Employers and healthcare consultants in trying to calculate the costs of providing a benefit, erroneously multiply 1 in every 88 covered lives in their plan by some average cost of treatment. This calculation, which is often a very large number, is inflated for several reasons. Two of those reasons include: 1) Not every individual with an ASD will access the benefit; and 2) Not every individual with an ASD who does access the benefit will utilize the maximum dollar amount. This can be demonstrated by comparing those who need Focused ABA (e.g., assessment and treatment of problem behavior) at 10-25 hours per week, to those requiring Comprehensive ABA (e.g., intensive early treatment) at 26-40 hours per week. If the assumption is that every individual affected by an ASD will access 40 hours a week of treatment at a cost of thousands of dollars per week, then companies will end up believing that coverage is not financially feasible. In reality, there are more accurate ways to calculate a cost estimate. When specific variables such as percent of access, utilization of authorized services, and recipient’s age, are used in the analysis, a more accurate and often less expensive cost are estimated.

Once a cost is estimated and a company decides to move forward, the benefit must be defined. While I cannot cover all of the aspects this process involves, I will touch on two areas for your consideration. First, cost share or copay. A company must realize that by requiring a copay to access ABA treatments, the use of those services might be impacted. If you think about an individual who receives treatment 3 times per week with a $50 copay per visit, very quickly a family’s expenses equal $150 per week or $600 per month. For many families, a copay in this amount could render a benefit financially unusable. Second, the plan must define who provides treatment. Does the plan adopt the
Locating a place of employment is one of the most prevalent challenges for an individual with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In fact, according to a study conducted in 2010 by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 21% of all adults with disabilities participated in the labor force as compared with 69% of non-disabled adults (www.autism-society.org/about-autism/facts-and-statistics.html). This is a truly alarming statistic, and with a projected 625% increase in adults (over the age of 22) with ASD in the next 16 years, these unemployment numbers will rise if the current trend continues.

What we must remember is that these individuals with ASD require valuable work experience to round out purpose and significance in their lives while being able to earn a meaningful wage, just as individuals without disabilities do.

To approach this escalating matter, there are ways for individuals to find employment fitting for each and every person. The importance of a responsive and accepting culture to address this need is imperative in order to develop opportunities, and fortunately, there is a growing interest among the population in effective employment program models and in employment opportunities. What is unique about the American culture, however, is its technical and corporate culture, which results in specialized employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. This isn’t the same case with areas outside of the United States where people with disabilities are incorporated and accepted into the workforce more – oftentimes employed in less technical and more diversified jobs.

For parents, clinicians, teachers, and loved ones of individuals with ASD who are looking for employment options for the individual, I recommend the below process be put into action in order to find the best opportunity for the person at hand:

1. Assess the individual by taking a strength-based approach
2. Find the job based on the person’s strengths and interests
3. Analyze the job
4. Prepare the individual
5. Prepare the employer and other employees
6. Expand upon growth

Start with a strength-based approach – or the notion of identifying a person’s talents and abilities and utilizing or building upon them for growth. This method of pinpointing what a person is good at or enjoys and connecting that to an employment opportunity harnesses success for both the individual and the employer, just like it does in the workplace for employees who are not disabled. Through thorough assessment, I have seen many individuals with ASD have unique and differing skills that can carry over into the workplace. For instance, if a person has good motor skills, they may be great in the area of fashion (assembling garments) or jewelry making. An individual with great upper strength would likely excel in physical work such as farm work, construction, or the lumber industry.

Many individuals with ASD or other disabilities find their jobs through many of the same means as people without disabilities. Job search engines like Monster, Career Builder, Craigslist, and so forth, are common places to narrow down and locate a possible job. Another excellent way to seek out a job is through family, friends, and acquaintances. These are sometimes the best ways to finding a job where the individual may already have experience with the company, such as a local supermarket, library, or school. What is most important is connecting the assessment of the person with a fitting job and having a compassionate culture willing to offer jobs to open up opportunities for individuals.

Once you have a good sense of the analysis of the person and what the job may be, it is important to break down the scope of the job so you can begin priming the individual. I encountered a situation recently that is a great example of how to break down the context and social circumstances to best prepare the person. The individual with ASD involved, Ethan*, had the opportunity to work at an organic farm. The farmer was open to having Ethan work on the farm, but Ethan’s parents were unsure if their son would be beneficial. I went to the farmer and asked what tasks Ethan

see Finding on page 22

Michael J. Cameron, PhD, BCBA-D
When College is Not an Option

By Nicholas A. Villani
President
Career and Employment Options, Inc.

College is generally considered the best path to a successful career, but the classes and structure of college can present a daunting challenge to individuals on the spectrum. The description of a “good job” might include factors of salary, stability, and the ability to grow; such jobs are not reserved only for college graduates.

Some of the more stable, high paying jobs are within businesses or organizations that do not require college or at least the traditional college route. Instead, those jobs may require a specific skill or trade, consistency in performance, willingness to work diligently at assignments requiring a different kind of skill and employee. Guidance counselors often are not trained to work with individuals on the spectrum who need assistance in finding work, college coaching and transition support, psychoeducational, neuropsychological, and speech & language testing, vocational support, family support, and educational consulting for individuals and families affected by Autism Spectrum Disorders and related conditions.

1. Federal Jobs - One of the places to look is USAJobs, the website for jobs in the federal government (https://help.usajobs.gov). Looking there does not necessarily ensure that the person would find a job, however, it is a resource for someone to begin the process of putting in their name and resume toward one of the jobs listed. There are jobs for people with and without degrees. There is also a page for individuals with a disability to peruse.

2. Civil Service Jobs at State or Local Levels - Both state and local government have what is known as a 55a or 55b waiver that enables someone with a disability to be given access without necessarily meeting the requirements of passing the civil service tests.

3. MTA, Long Island Railroad (LIRR) and other municipal jobs - Often considered difficult to access, we consider those organizations to be very fraternal, but with both persistence and new changes in laws these jobs can be accessible.

4. Union Jobs - They are still most sought after as they offer higher pay, a unique support system, and better benefits than non-union jobs. One can consider a job within the specific trade of a union, or also consider jobs within the support systems of those union members.

5. Utilities - Water Authority, Long Island Power Authority (LIPA - now PSE&G), National Grid, Verizon, Cablevision and other like utilities. They can offer stability, good pay, and excellent benefits.

All of these jobs still require persistence in the pursuit, good career skills (resume, see College on page 34).

Spectrum Services

A Cooperative Private Practice Offering an Array of Specialized Services

Spectrum Services provides child and adult diagnosis, family and couples therapy, pragmatic language and social groups, specialized individual skill-building therapy, cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), trauma focused therapy and EMDR, dialectical behavior therapy approaches, mindfulness work, college coaching and transition support, psychosocial work, educational, neuropsychological, and speech & language testing, vocational support, family support, and educational consulting for individuals and families affected by Autism Spectrum Disorders and related conditions.

Lynda Geller, PhD, Founder and Psychologist
Rahimeh Andalibian, PsyD, Psychologist
Ronni Aronow, MA, MS, College Transition Consultant
Jaime Black, PsyD, Psychologist
Karen Chin, PhD, Psychologist
Katherine Cody, PsyD, Individual and Family Therapy
David A. Cooperman, MD, Psychiatrist
Peter DellaBella, MD, Psychiatrist
Valerie Gaus, PhD, Psychologist
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Carole Kornsweig, MA, CCC-SLP, Speech and Language Pathologist
Stephen Migden, PhD, ABPP, Independent Educational Consultant
Mitchell Nagler, MA, LMHC, Mental Health Counselor
Michele Robins, PhD, Neuropsychologist
Shuli Sandler, PsyD, Psychologist
Patricia Schissel, LMSW, Social Worker
Leslie Sickels, LMSW, Social Worker
Ilene Solomon, PhD, Neuropsychologist
Nancy Waring Weiss, MS, CCC-SLP, Speech and Language Pathologist
Beth Yurman, PsyD, Psychologist

The Asperger Syndrome Training & Employment Partnership (ASTEP) focuses on employer education and training, and advises employers on how to recruit and manage employees with Asperger Syndrome. www.asperger-employment.org

Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism Association (AHA) provides support programs, conferences, activities, a hotline and reliable, up-to-date information for individuals and families. www.ahany.org

Career and Employment Options, Inc. (CEO) provides transition supports for students in special education and job placement services for students and adults with Asperger Syndrome and other disabilities. www.ceoinworks.com

The Elijah Foundation provides advocacy support, educational outreach and comprehensive workshops in Applied Behavior Analysis for educators and family members. www.theelijahfoundation.org

Contact us through www.spectrumservicesnyc.com for clinical services.

Please visit www.aspergercenter.com for articles of interest for families and adults with Asperger Syndrome.
Opportunities from page 1

receiving and fulfilling orders and customer service. Informal supports include prompting, reminders, advice and/or guidance, while formal supports include an employment specialist.

Organizations like Roses for Autism are proof and inspiration that success can happen when proper supports are in place. Students on the autism spectrum can be productive, valued employees of many corporations. Companies need to apply such supports so that more individuals with autism get the opportunity to be successful in the workplace.

Interventions: Forming an Alliance in a New Workplace

What are some of the necessary steps to support individuals on the spectrum in a workplace less prepared than the example above? Focus is required in addressing and identifying current obstacles already existing for individuals with ASD within the job market. Further, the implementation of key strategies for an employee’s integration into a new workplace, and how to effectively manage and encourage new growth and participation in such a work environment once hired, is integral. As future employers continue to become educated on disability in the workplace, vocational advocates and coaches can provide a crucial and highly empowering service in aiding, organizing, and acclimating individuals with ASD to the world of work.

Obstacles faced by job-seeking participants with ASD have been grouped into four major categories: Mastering the job application process, acclimating to new job routines, communication, and lastly, navigating social interactions with supervisors and co-workers (Muller, Schuler, Burton, & Yates, n.d.). Some individuals report difficulties in creating a professional resume, while others face difficulties in job interviewing and phone contact and follow up, and report a generalized feeling of being overwhelmed throughout the entire job application process. With these struggles in mind, a vocational coach or “job coach” can assist in making such processes seem less arduous. Creating tools and strategies before the job search can help differentiate an individual’s work strengths, as they are needed in a current job market. Such assessment tools include: An identification of niche career interest, personality type, sensory sensitivities, and intervention needs in the practice of social skills, eye gaze, greetings, introductions and interviewing techniques (Johnston-Tyler, n.d.). Synthesizing how an individual’s unique talents, interests, and needs align with current occupations through job matching, is a great means for approaching the job search in a way that is career-minded, well defined, and ultimately, rewarding. Johnston-Tyler’s suggestions to develop an “elevator pitch” of job interests, revise resumes, practice interviewing techniques and build networking skills are fundamentals which not only familiarize an individual on the spectrum with their own abilities, but encourage the self-determination and self-advocacy so vital to a burgeoning work environment during career development.

An important consideration for an employee with ASD is the individual’s decision of whether or not to disclose a documented disability and request accommodations. These decisions require asking big-picture questions. Assessing an individual on the spectrum’s adaptability to a “neurotypical” workplace and, conversely, assessing a “neurotypical” workplace’s adaptability and tolerance of the needs of a “neurodiverse” employee, is precisely the area in which so many work environments fail to evaluate. These conversations are ones that take time and patience on both sides, and mark the beginning of a nuanced and unique consideration of an employee with ASD to the work environment. Career counselors can provide essential support in communicating work areas of difficulty, such as: social communication, sensory sensitivities, processing and organizational abilities, and behavior management. Similarly, identifying if and where an employer shows themselves fit for demonstrating acceptance of diversity, providing non-management tracks for promotion of technical workers, focusing on merit as a primary criteria for promotion, allowing flexibility in work hours, ability to telecommute, and outlining consistency in daily job duties and schedules can provide immeasurable relief and clear understanding for a newly hired employee (Johnston-Tyler, n.d.).

see Opportunities on page 38

Raul Jimenez II, MST

Amy Greenberg, BA
The many challenges confronting the field of developmental disabilities require new perspectives and approaches. YAI’s International Conference, “Designing the Future,” will explore innovative models and solutions on April 28-May 1, at the New York Hilton Midtown, 1335 Avenue of the Americas.

More than 25 sessions and extended workshops on autism will provide attendees with access to hands-on training and leading experts.

“The issues confronting us as a field are real, diverse and complex,” said Matthew Sturiale, Interim CEO of YAI. “Change is a necessity, not a choice. It is time to work more effectively to help the people we support live the life they desire and deserve.” Among the highlights are:

• Thorkil Sonne, President, Specialisterne USA, will discuss “The Power of Difference” on Monday, April 28 as part of the keynote session from 9 a.m.-noon. Specialisterne USA assesses and employs individuals with autism as consultants in IT and other tech sectors.

• Moira Lewis and Brooker Lozott, Marcus Autism Center in Georgia, “Unfolding of autism spectrum disorder symptoms in the first year of life, April 28, 1:30-4:30 p.m.

• Expanded behavior analysis workshops featuring Dr. Vincent J. Carbone, Director, Carbone Clinic, Tuesday, April 29, 9 a.m.-noon; and Jose A. Martinez-Diaz, Professor and Associate Dean, Florida Institute of Technology, School of Behavior Analysis in Florida, Thursday, May 1, 9 am-3 pm.

• Dr. Jill Krata, Manager of Clinical Services, YAI Autism Center, and Dr. Valerie Gaus, Clinical Psychologist, on positive psychology, Tuesday, April 29, 1:30-4:30 p.m.

• Dr. Stephen Shore, Assistant Professor of Special Education, Author, Adelphi University, is among the panel to present on the power of collaboration, Wednesday, April 30, 9 a.m.-noon. He also will participate in a new Self-Advocacy Summit, later that day from 1:30-4:30 p.m.

• A special session for family caregivers on April 30, 5:30-7:30 p.m., with Dr. Tamar Heller, Professor and Head, Dept. of Disability and Human Development; Director, Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Aging with Developmental Disabilities, University of Illinois at Chicago.

For more information and to see the full conference brochure, visit yai.org/conference2014. Questions? Contact Abbe Wittenberg at abbe.wittenberg@yai.org or 212-273-6472.

Special conference rate at the Hilton New York is available until April 9, 2014. Call 212-586-7000 and use group code YAI. The special rate also applies to weekends, based on availability.
Examination from page 1

juxtaposition of evidence that people with autism can successfully sustain employment when provided with adequate support and reports showing the inadequacy of employment support, there exists today a dire need to provide information on evidence-based approaches that can be employed in the delivery of employment training and support for individuals with autism.

Universal Design for Transition

One approach that offers appropriate evidence-based practices available for preparing adults with autism for employment is Universal Design for Transition (UDT). The principles and practices of UDT have been shown to be highly effective in preparing persons with disabilities for transition to work (Scott, Saddler, Thoma, Bartholomew, Alder, & Tamura, 2011). The UDT approach can provide the overarching philosophy and framework for employment preparation and support, serving as a guide to move individuals toward identifying and attaining employment goals.

UDT principles recognize that individuals are different in how they learn and acquire skills, how they interact with other people and with their environment, and how they are able to demonstrate knowledge or skill mastery. UDT-based instruction modifies and adapts learning activities rather than trying to change the individual. The UDT framework offers instruction that is designed to prepare individuals for employment, taking into account their learning characteristics, abilities, interests, and challenges (Thoma, Bartholomew, & Scott, 2009; Zager & Alpern, 2010). Essentially, the goal of UDT is to enable all individuals to obtain and sustain employment in community-based settings by ensuring that the work environment is maneuverable, manageable, and satisfying for all users. The UDT model was created by building on the Universal Design principles of (1) multiple means of representation (i.e., varied ways to present information that needs to be learned); (2) multiple means of expression (i.e., alternative methods of assessment to demonstrate skills and knowledge learned); and (3) multiple means of engagement (i.e., connecting work to personal interests to increase motivation) (Rose & Meyer, 2006). In UDT, employment tasks are scaffolded so that participants can enter tasks at their own level. Assistive technology plays a significant role in UDT as it offers multiple avenues for information presentation, acquisition, task completion, and expression of knowledge. Goals are accomplished through concrete presentation of information related to individual interests and needs. Through UDT’s framework, knowledge and skills needed in jobs are made meaningful through real world tasks, so that curriculum content can be mastered in real work environments (Thoma, Bartholomew, & Scott, 2009). For example, a person who wants to work in a hospital lab needs skills in measuring liquids (math), using lab equipment (science), and reading skills to identify the appropriate materials to use as well as to match the test with the patient (reading/English).

Elements of Effective Employment Intervention

The following elements should be featured throughout employment intervention

see Examination on page 42
At some point, most of us will find ourselves writing a resume, going on an interview and, hopefully, fielding a job offer. We’ll spend most of our adult lives waking up, enduring some kind of commute, performing a series of tasks, returning home — only to repeat the process again the next day. And most of us won’t think twice about it. For many, work is a simple and inevitable concept. For individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), however, work is neither simple nor inevitable. Instead, it represents a million small interactions that require constant thought, accommodation, and perseverance.

UJA-Federation of New York is the largest local philanthropy in the world, caring for all New Yorkers in need and strengthening the Jewish community in New York and in 70 countries around the world. Part of this work includes increasing the inclusion and independence of families and individuals with special needs. Because UJA-Federation is committed to reducing the barriers that exist for young adults with ASD to enjoy opportunities that are available in mainstream settings, two years ago we started to map out a comprehensive plan.

Working with the Autism Science Foundation, a survey was created in the spring of 2012 and distributed to explore the broad needs of young adults on the spectrum and to specifically identify obstacles to obtaining and maintaining employment. Using the Interactive Autism Network (IAN) national online registry, UJA-Federation reached out to three sub-groups: young adults on the spectrum, ages 18-35, who are legally independent; parents of young adults with ASD in that same 18-35 age bracket who are legally independent; and legal guardians of young adults with ASD who are not independent and require supervision under legal guardianship. Not surprisingly, the results clearly showed that work opportunities held the most potential to foster independence and inclusion of this unique population.

Work Experiences, Neither Happy Nor Secure

More than 200 individuals with ASD, parents, and legal guardians responded to the survey. Of the independent young adults with ASD who completed the survey, the vast majority (87 percent) reported that they worked in the past year (either paid employment, internships, or volunteer placements) and, most were working in full-time employment of 30 hours or more per week. Of these respondents, nearly half reported dissatisfaction with their job because “they didn’t make enough money,” “weren’t able to use their skills,” or “were not working in a field that interested them.”

Two-thirds (64 percent) of the responding independent young adults with ASD who reported working in the past year had, at some point, lost a paid job or internship. Seventy percent of these respondents who lost jobs had been fired, and, 43 percent had been laid off or “downsized.” High levels of dissatisfaction or discomfort were also seen in the more than half of those working who quit their positions, paid or unpaid.

Drilling down further into these figures, the report found that characteristics typically associated with ASD contributed to an individual getting fired or laid off. Specifically, respondents reported that “social mistakes” were the most predominant reasons behind losing a job, followed by an inability to “work fast enough,” “stay organized,” or “get along with others.” One-fourth of the young adults reported they were let go because “people didn’t understand or were uncomfortable” with their autism. Social issues were also reported by a large majority of independent young adults with ASD as the reasons for why they could not obtain employment today.

Finally, additional key findings included a lack of structured activity, an inability to find meaningful ways to spend their time, and difficulties in accessing services and navigating systems as the largest barriers to achieving life goals after high school.

Dream Big and Bold

UJA-Federation supports a network of nearly 100 agencies that focus on poverty, health, aging, special needs, strengthening Jewish life, and more. Relying on the data

By Melanie Goldberg, LMSW
Caring Commission
UJA-Federation of New York

Melanie Goldberg, LMSW

Westchester Jewish Community Services

Autism Center

Learn More About Our Many Support Programs

Our Programs are Non-Sectarian

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For more information contact
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Vocational Training and Employment Center (VTEC)
gives teens and young adults with special needs the opportunity to prepare for future employment through career assessments, workshops, job placements and job support.

Funded by UJA-Federation of New York, Sheldon A. Sennet, B.A.S.I.C.S. Fund and the Taft Foundation.
Providing Opportunities for Employment

By L. Lynn Stansberry-Brusnahan, PhD, University of St. Thomas in Minnesota and Debra Cote, PhD, California State University, Fullerton

Integrated work experiences enhance the quality of life for those living with ASD, reduce financial strain on aging parents, and contribute to the economic development of communities. A lack of supports and low expectations can result in sheltered work experiences, unemployment, and underemployment for people with ASD. Levy and Perry (2011) found the average percentage of individuals with ASD who find work is 24% with job status and stability typically low (Barnhill, 2007; Eaves & Ho, 2008, Howlin, Alcock, & Burkin, 2005).

An analysis of the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 data found only 27.9% of youth including those with autism were employed (Carter, Austin, & Trainor, 2011). Another study put the percentage of youth with developmental disabilities employed in integrated jobs with competitive wages at only 14.2% (Simonsen, 2010). In this article, we highlight four initiatives, among the many emerging across the nation, working to provide employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. These include: (a) Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities, (b) Minnesota Life College, (c) Autism Society of Minnesota, and (d) Specialisterne Midwest.

Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities

The Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities (WI-BPDD) is dedicated to improving the independence, productivity, and integration of people with developmental disabilities through projects such as Let’s Get to Work (http://www.letsgettoworkwi.org/). Executive Director Beth Sweedeen reports that this project implements practices that elevate community expectations and employment outcomes for youth with disabilities. WI-BPDD’s project promotes working with school sites and communities to implement a coordinated set of evidence-based practices that expand competitive employment in integrated settings.

Participating school sites create school-wide opportunity maps to identify paid and pre-vocational employment opportunities existing throughout the school and community. Starting early in adolescence, person-centered planning is utilized and the project connects families with post-secondary options and resources such as the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. Teachers are engaged in this project as they play an integral role in implementing transition programming and providing access to general education and extra-curricular activities related to students’ interests/career goals. Inclusion in general education classes is an important focus, because when students with disabilities are not active in their schools, employers, families, and the larger community have trouble envisioning them as potential workers, thereby reinforcing low vocational expectations (Sweedeen, Carter, & Molfenter, 2010; Test et al., 2009). Additionally, inclusive classes and extra-curricular activities provide career possibilities, opportunities to develop skills, and access to connections that open doors to job or volunteer experiences (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Garza, 2006). The schools are identifying opportunities for inclusion and participating in models such as co-teaching in general education classrooms to support students.

Community awareness and involvement is a second focus of the project. By engaging the broader community and decision
When Your Grandchild Has Autism

I’m always struck at the number of grandparents who turn up at the public reading I have been doing since publishing my book. During the discussion afterwards they usually ask similar questions: “I have a granddaughter with autism. What should I do when she flaps her hands?” or, “Why do the tags on his sweater bother him so much?”

One time I met a tall slender man with thick white hair in Barnes & Noble. He talked to me for almost ten minutes about his twelve-year old granddaughter’s bright blue eyes, her fear of the dark, and her obsession with Teenage Ninja Mutant Turtles. And then he looked straight at me and asked if I thought she would ever get married.

Whether they go by Grandma and Grandpa or Nana and Pop or Meme and Bumpa, they all ask about sensory integration and weighted blankets and self-stimulation: the buzzwords that weren’t around when they had small children. They are hungry for knowledge and yearn to connect with their sometimes spinning, oftentimes silent grandsons and granddaughters.

I never feel like I have enough time to answer these questions the way I would like, so I stammer and stumble through something meaningless and disjointed. Then I pack up the extra books and my black pen and walk to my car feeling unfinished, incomplete.

Whether they go by Grandma and Grandpa or Nana and Pop or Meme and Bumpa, they all ask about sensory integration and weighted blankets and self-stimulation: the buzzwords that weren’t around when they had small children. They are hungry for knowledge and yearn to connect with their sometimes spinning, oftentimes silent grandsons and granddaughters.

But I feel like I have enough time to answer these questions the way I would like, so I stammer and stumble through something meaningless and disjointed. Then I pack up the extra books and my black pen and walk to my car feeling unfinished, incomplete.

My husband Joe is the youngest of six children in a large Italian family, and out of twenty grandchildren, my son Jack is the only one diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. (Yes, that’s right: there are twenty grandchildren. When we all get together we total well over thirty. I don’t even have autism and I get overwhelmed.)

Back when we were in the process of Jack’s diagnosis, we lived in Buffalo, NY and Joe’s parents lived in Lake Carmel, NY - a six hour drive away. Over the phone every week I would describe Jack’s lack of speech, his delay in development, the eerie way he wouldn’t look at me. And they always said the same thing: give it time, his older brother Joey is talking for him; he is fine, he is fine, he will be fine.

Jack was nearly three when we moved to New Hampshire, and my in-laws followed from Lake Carmel about a year later. By that point it was well understood that Jack was not fine.

Before long they started taking some of the other kids to sleep at their house, to teach them meatball-making and sing them to sleep in the small guest room. But not Jack. One time they drove down the driveway with Jack’s brothers Joey and Charlie waving from the backseat of their Saturn while Jack stood next to me, turning the same Little People figure over and over in his hand. I couldn’t help but feel as though some invisible line had been drawn; them, but not him. They would never understand him, never be able to handle him.

And who could blame them? At that time Jack was a total flight risk, adept at picking locks and slipping silently out the door. He only knew about a dozen words. He threw giant tantrums and woke several times a night. The truth is, they were as heartbroken as we were. They longed to connect

see Grandchild on page 28

Jack with his Grandparents

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Becoming an Autism Employment Entrepreneur

By Marjorie Madfis
Founder and President
Yes She Can Inc.

Last fall, after a 30 year career in corporate marketing, I joined the ranks of a handful of other parents and social service agencies in a new movement referred to as autism employment entrepreneurship. I founded Yes She Can Inc. as a nonprofit dedicated to developing job skills and employment opportunities for young women with autism spectrum disorders.

Channeling a Passion

My daughter, who is almost 18, has always loved American Girl dolls. She has been and is excessively brand loyal having started her collection at age 3 with a Bitty Baby as a gift, and now (I hate to admit it) has 8 American Girl dolls. She loves reading the story books about a 10-year-old girl in a particular time in history as well as the contemporary advice books about caring for your body and your emotions. She knows each historical doll’s outfits and she makes up personas for her “girls of today.”

She spends hours on the website playing games and studying the catalog. Years ago I had wondered how to channel this passion and expertise into a future for her. “My dream job is to work at American Girl Place” she has always said. I thought given her passion perhaps she could actually have a job at the store - IF. If she could take the train to Grand Central and then walk to the store - without being abducted. If she could handle 20 hours a week of work in a highly stimulating retail environment – where everything she sees her wants. If American Girl would even hire her - with a coach.

But what if she couldn’t and they wouldn’t? So I thought about creating the same environment that she loves in the store: the merchandise for sale, the doll hair salon, the cafe, and the library, (and they used to have a performance theater). The twist would be that the merchandise we would sell would be previously owned for resale. And that there would be many jobs that she and young women like her could do. And I knew there would be demand for the product.

I also wanted to make sure that there would be opportunity for employees to develop skills that they could transfer to other jobs with other companies - perhaps a teen fashion store or toy store. My vision was not just creating a job for my daughter, but starting a career for many young women. If I wanted to have an impact on more than a handful of people I needed to have a business model that either could scale up, or that could scale out. Scaling up would mean that I would have to create more stores in more locations, finding more used merchandise and more store managers. Scaling out meant that the marketplace would need to absorb my well trained staff so that I could keep adding fresh first time workers to my employment ranks. Of course this meant that I would always have an inefficient workforce. I also did not want to create a sheltered workshop. I wanted to have an inclusive integrated workplace where people with and without ASD would work together.

I never wanted to be a retail empire building a chain of resale shops. Furthermore, I realized that there could be girls and women who might not be interested in American Girl dolls - really, I know. They might be interested and skilled in software coding or Legos or dog walking. So rather than think of the business as a single doll resale shop, I thought of it as an incubator with a portfolio of businesses for skill building where we would “spin off” people to other businesses.

Last November I launched Yes She Can Inc.

Finding from page 14

would be fulfilling – which included weeding, watering plants, waiting on people who visited the farm, retrieving eggs, and other farm tasks. This allowed me to build an inventory to go back and begin working with Ethan. Ethan and I began simulation work with borrowed materials from the farm, including:

- Imitating tasks that Ethan would be performing on the farm to familiarize him with the processes and allow him to feel comfortable.
- I took video of the farm to familiarize Ethan with the land, tools, people and area.
- We used narrative-based instruction by talking through the responsibilities and having Ethan recite them aloud.
- We practiced video self-modeling to record Ethan performing the tasks, such as taking a plant out of a pot and pre-soiling, and I played the video back to Ethan so he would become confident in his abilities.
- With talking photo albums, we inserted photos of the farm into sleeves and put them in the talking photo album to get a sense of the other people employed.

Once the individual is comfortably prepared to being working, the co-workers and employer need to be prepared as well. It is safe to assume that many co-workers do not understand ASD or what to expect. Through education, co-workers can understand whom the individual is, the best way to communicate with them, and things to do or not do. While some people might be rude or socially ostracizing, managing expectations through education helps prepare all parties involved.

As the person becomes more involved in their employment, there are many positive effects and side effects as a result. In Ethan’s case, he made social connections on the farm so that when he went into the community, people recognized him and greeted or spoke with him. This allowed Ethan confidence and comfort within the community to grow. While now receiving a paycheck, Ethan learned how to manage money, use ATM machines, make deposits or withdrawals, and save for things he wanted. Because of his new job, additional opportunities were generated for Ethan. It is important for individuals to identify these potential effects and take action toward them.

Matching the strengths of an individual to a job opportunity and preparing both the individual and co-workers can set the stage for success and support a person with ASD. Although awareness and implantation of this approach currently is low, I have seen this process effectively executed with the support and help of the individual’s family, clinicians and loved ones.

Eric London, MD
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Improving Employment Outcomes for Individuals with Autism

By Marcia Scheiner
Executive Director
Asperger Syndrome Training and Employment Partnership

In 2013, a study published by Professor Paul Shattuck, then at Washington University, reported on the outcomes for young adults on the autism spectrum. From Shattuck’s study, we learned that just over half (53.4 percent) of the young adults on the autism spectrum surveyed had ever worked for pay outside the home, within the first eight years after leaving high school. Only about one in five (20.9 percent) young adults with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) worked full-time at a current or most-recent job. According to Shattuck, these employment rates were significantly less than peers with other disabilities. Yet, in spite of this disheartening news, Shattuck found that 35% of young adults diagnosed with an ASD were obtaining some form of post-secondary education. If young adults with an ASD are obtaining greater levels of education than ever previously experienced, why do their employment prospects continue to be so poor?

Many individuals with disabilities look for employment support with their state’s Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency. For 2012, the Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the US had 117,500 Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, with an expected growth rate in such jobs of 20% over the next ten years. Yet, while the number of people with disabilities (including autism) continues to grow in such jobs of 20% over the next ten years. Yet, while the number of people with disabilities (including autism) continues to grow in such jobs of 20% over the next ten years. Yet, while the number of people with disabilities (including autism) continues to grow in such jobs of 20% over the next ten years. Yet, while the number of people with disabilities (including autism) continues to grow in such jobs of 20% over the next ten years. Yet, while the number of people with disabilities (including autism) continues to grow in such jobs of 20% over the next ten years. Yet, while the number of people with disabilities (including autism) continues to grow in such jobs of 20% over the next ten years. Yet, while the number of people with disabilities (including autism) continues to grow in such jobs of 20% over the next ten years. Yet, while the number of people with disabilities (including autism) continues to grow in such jobs of 20% over the next ten years. Yet, while the number of people with disabilities (including autism) continues to grow. In 2011, state VR agencies reported 175,441 cases closed with a successful employment outcome. At the 2012 level of Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, that is only 1.5 placements a year per counselor.

At the Asperger Syndrome Training & Employment Partnership (ATEST), we believe the unemployment crisis in the autism community is the result of:

- Lack of knowledge by employers of the talents and skills individuals with autism can bring to their workplace;
- Concern by employers about the types of accommodations they will need to make for employees with an ASD;
- Uncertainty by employers about how to find and successfully integrate individuals with autism into their organizations, and
- A need to develop a person AND employer focused approach to placing individuals with disabilities into appropriate, competitive employment.

In large Fortune 1000 companies, the hiring decision includes a number of variables:

- Quality of candidates: Could the person being considered meet the job requirements? How much training would they need, and is the employer capable of providing that training?
- Workforce diversity: Does the candidate bring some form of diversity to the job that will enhance the work environment and work quality of the entire company? Diversity of background, life, and work experiences causes all of us to bring different perspectives to solving the same problem.
- Regulatory/legal compliance: Does the company need to meet certain governmental imposed requirements or guidelines to employ individuals within certain classes (ie: women, minorities, people with disabilities)? Do key customers require the company to meet supplier diversity requirements along these same dimensions? [Note: In 2013, the US Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs implemented a guideline for all federal contractors and subcontractors that their workforce must have 7% of employees be persons with disabilities. A company qualifies as a federal contractor or subcontractor if they have a contract with the Federal government or an agency of the Federal government for $10,000 or more.]

Marcia Scheiner

Your financial needs are unique. Ameriprise Financial

Preparing for the financial future of a child with special needs presents special challenges. As the father of a special needs child, I understand the complexities of your situation. I’ll look at all aspects of your finances, then find solutions that are right for your unique needs. And as your goals and needs change, I’ll be there to help keep your family’s plan on track.

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What Employers Need to Know About Asperger’s Syndrome: Accommodating Managers and Professionals on the Spectrum

By Barbara Bissonnette
Principal
Forward Motion Coaching

There is increasing evidence, albeit anecdotal, that autism is now on the radar screens of employers. Last year, SAP, the giant software company, pledged that in the next few years 1% of its workforce will be individuals on the autism spectrum. The announcement generated widespread publicity. SAP’s message was a positive one: utilizing the specialized abilities of autistic individuals.

Also fueling awareness is that so many people today know of someone who is on the autism spectrum. As a human resources director recently told me, “Five years ago, if you mentioned Asperger’s Syndrome, I wouldn’t know what you were talking about. Now, I can name several people who have it.”

Despite this, employers are often unsure of how to manage these employees, particularly the highly capable individuals who are in mid-manager or professional jobs. They are too high-functioning to need the services of an on-site job coach/trainer, yet they often face significant challenges in the workplace. There may be a pattern of repeated job losses, or chronic exhaustion from the stress of making it through another work day.

The protections provided by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) are vital for those on the autism spectrum. The ADA prohibits employers from discriminating against individuals with disabilities. It requires companies to make reasonable accommodations — modifications that enable a person to participate in the interviewing process, or to perform his job.

As I have seen repeatedly in my practice, workplace accommodations can mean the difference between a person keeping or losing a job. This is especially true for people with Asperger’s Syndrome. There may be a pattern of repeated job loss — too high-functioning to need the services of an on-site job coach/trainer, yet they often face significant challenges in the workplace. There may be a pattern of repeated job losses, or chronic exhaustion from the stress of making it through another work day.

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As I have seen repeatedly in my practice, workplace accommodations can mean the difference between a person keeping or losing a job. This is especially true for people with Asperger’s Syndrome. For many who are college-educated and in salaried positions, autism is a hidden disability. The characteristic difficulties with interpersonal communication appear to be attitude problems, and are treated accordingly. Minor misunderstandings can quickly escalate to disciplinary actions or firings.

Even those who manage to avoid sticky social situations may be ostracized or bullied for being different. The workplace is unforgiving of those who are judged as not being team players.

Sometimes, the most important accommodation to result from a disclosure of Asperger’s Syndrome is understanding. It allows managers to reconcile how an employee who is obviously smart and skilled can have so much difficulty interacting with other people.

Now that Asperger’s Syndrome is no longer in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), some individuals wonder whether this understanding is in jeopardy. Most members of the general public — including supervisors and human resources managers — know very little about the autism spectrum. Myths and stereotypes remain. Asperger’s Syndrome tends to be associated with eccentric geniuses who work in high technology or engineering. Autism is associated with Dustin Hoffman’s character in the movie Rain Man.

Many organizations require that an employee who discloses a disability provide proof of a medical diagnosis. Dave is typical of individuals I work with who are in middle-management or professional jobs. “I’m afraid that if I told my employer that I have autism, it would ruin my career,” he said. “I don’t know what I’ll do if I need an accommodation.”

This is an excellent example of why the term Asperger’s Syndrome should not go away. It clearly differentiates these individuals from those who are on the Kanner’s end of the continuum. The autism spectrum as defined in the DSM-5 is so broad as to be impractical, particularly when defining necessary workplace supports and accommodations.

It is also critical that employers be educated about Asperger’s Syndrome. Understanding brings patience and acceptance. This does not mean that employers should tolerate inappropriate or offensive conduct. Addressing performance problems often requires companies to make reasonable accommodations — modifications that enable a person to participate in the interviewing process, or to perform his job.

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Creating the Path to Employment

By Jerry Philip
Program Development Manager
New York Collaborates for Autism

New York Collaborates for Autism (NYCA) creates comprehensive, evidence-based community services to support people living with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) right now.

In 2011, NYCA launched Project SEARCH, a unique transition to employment program created by Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center, which provides training and real-life work experience to help youth with significant intellectual disabilities.

With the support of Project SEARCH, NYCA launched Project SEARCH Collaborates for Autism (PSCA) in partnership with NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital, ARC of Westchester, Southern Westchester BOCES (SW BOCES) and Adult Career and Continuing Education Services-Vocational Rehabilitation (ACCES-VR). PSCA uses an autism specific curriculum that was created by NYCA in collaboration with NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital’s Center for Autism and the Developing Brain in White Plains.

The PSCA curriculum is made up of five central components including student internships, peer mentoring, family involvement, a Business Advisory Council and employment planning. As a whole, the curriculum helps students with ASD learn more than the skills of a job. Specifically, the curriculum focuses on helping the students with ASD learn the “soft skills” needed to succeed in a work environment. By understanding that the expectations and culture of a work environment are very different from a school environment, these students will more successfully transition from their last year of high school into meaningful employment. Students participate in three internship rotations with the host employer, NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital, and are supported by a team that includes their family, a special education teacher from SW BOCES and a job coach from ARC of Westchester.

What started as a pilot program is now in its third academic year.

Kyle Szewczewicz, a member of the 2013 graduating class, credits PSCA with helping him discover what skills he excelled at and most enjoyed.

The PSCA program empowers people with ASD to acquire competitive, transferable and marketable job skills, as well as to gain increased independence, confidence and self-esteem. Kyle and his mother credit PSCA with his successful transition from high school to employment.
A wave of high school and college graduates with talent, ability, and a tremendous capacity to contribute are hitting the job market but they are not getting hired. Recent statistics show that 75% of people with autism spectrum disorders are either unemployed or underemployed. Many of those that are working are performing in menial jobs that do not reflect their talents and skills.

As a licensed social worker for the past 20 plus years, I have served a niche area working with teens and young adults on the autism spectrum. My focus is on preparation for transition, career counseling, and job coaching as they struggle to move forward with their lives post-graduation. Many have high school diplomas, college degrees, and some graduate degrees. Irrespective of their educational background, work can be elusive.

For people with AS or high functioning autism, a large part of the problem in getting hired is the lack of understanding on the part of the employer as to who they are and what they can offer. These challenges affect the interview process and when competing for a given position, the person with ASD inevitably loses.

My goal was to find a way to level the playing field for these individuals by finding a company that, if given the appropriate supports, was willing to learn the advantages of employing these young adults, creating a win/win for both.

Rowan Document Solutions is a small boutique company servicing private practitioners, medical groups, and hospitals by imaging medical reports. Imaging of medical documents requires preparing the charts to go into the scanners. Charts are meticulously gone through to prepare them for the scanning process. There is a data entry requirement at the beginning and end of this process. It is important to note at this time that this company is run by my son Greg Rowan, who through his association with myself and my work, along with volunteer activities, was no stranger to working with people with disabilities.

The story of how this company hired and retained the services of a handful of people with ASD to its financial benefit began with educating the employer.

Education

Employers tend to fear the unknown. If they lack experience in a particular area, they will be wary of it. If they have never encountered people with cognitive differences, they will be nervous about hiring them. Step 1 - Break down the barriers of fear and ignorance; a whole new labor pool is opened up to them. With education and a solid support strategy, employers are taught the benefits of hiring people with strong personal characteristics like reliability, honesty, and loyalty as well as their creativity, technical proficiency, and attention to detail. These attributes equate to positive financial gains to businesses. Other advantages to hiring people with disabilities are wage subsidy programs, tax incentives, and social marketing benefits.

“Social marketing is a relatively new idea in the corporate world. Corporations are recognizing that monetary- and voluntary-based contributions that support increased employability of people with disabilities make good marketing practice” (Finding Work That Works for People With AS, Gail Hawkins. Jessica Kingsley Press, 2004).

Step 2 - After the employer has a better understanding of the advantages of hiring people with ASD, a job coach or professional promoting employment meets with the supervisors for training. These are the people who will be on the front lines working directly with the individual. They are educated about the strengths and challenges of the individual, and have their questions and concerns addressed. An ongoing, open communication for troubleshooting between the job coach, supervisors, and the employee see Win-Win on page 33
Smart Pens, Tablets, and Word Prediction Software:
Utilizing Technology for High School and College Students

By Casey Schmalacker, BA and Samantha Feinman, MSED, TSSH
New Frontiers in Learning

As we move through this digital age, students in high school and college are increasingly using technology as a mechanism to support learning. Technology can be used in a multitude of ways, ranging from electronic organizational systems and digital reminders to supporting more complex academic tasks through the use of computer software. Assistive technology, specifically, has been infused into the daily schedules of students with disabilities to support the removal of learning barriers that some individuals may face. Among students utilizing assistive technology to improve academic learning, high school and college students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in particular have increasingly incorporated the use of technology into the learning environment.

Assistive technology consists of services and devices that provide equal education opportunities to students with disabilities by providing supports that focus on individual-specific needs. Assistive technology has been used to improve skills in areas such as note-taking, reading comprehension, and expository and narrative writing. Such tasks are integral to the academic experience, in that a student’s ability to excel in these areas most often is directly related to their level of success. This article will discuss why assistive technology is necessary for students with ASD transitioning from high school to college, as well as outline three forms of effective assistive technology, and how one would incorporate such technology into the learning environment.

Research has demonstrated that the use of computers has resulted in the improvement of the skills of students with ASD in a variety of different areas such as attention, fine motor, and generalization (Habashi, 2005). Improvement of skills is many times the desirable goal, and therefore technology can act as a means to accommodating specific deficits that prevent goal attainment.

In order to achieve success in the high school and college arenas, students need to be able to access supports to successfully comprehend large amounts of reading material and class lecture and discussion, as well as write at a much more independent and sophisticated level. When students demonstrate weaknesses in these areas, they are unable to demonstrate their maximum potential, and their work may become an inaccurate representation of their true capabilities. Assistive technology can begin to bridge the gap between student obstacles and the execution of their academic responsibilities.

Developing strategies and systems for use with assistive technology is important to master during high school so students can effectively deploy the technologies at the college level. The college work environment has a few fundamental differences from high school that can increase the difficulty level, especially for students with ASD. Class time at universities is devoted to many more lectures, requiring vigorous note-taking on course content that, many times, is important to know for exams.

Cut Out for Him: A Father on His Son’s Employment Future

By Jeff Stimpson
Journalist

My 15-year-old son Alex (diagnosed PDD-NOS) goes to a special-needs school where some students are old enough to work. A few years ago Alex’s teacher told me about when she approached a local thrift shop about students volunteering there.

“We don’t hire the handicapped,” the clerk said.

“In the first place,” said Alex’s teacher, “I’m asking about volunteering for no pay. In the second place, we don’t use that term anymore.”

“Well whatever you call them,” the clerk replied, “we don’t hire them.”

Too bad. In supermarkets Alex turns all the cans on the shelf so the labels face straight out. He empties our dishwasher in the morning. He sets holiday dinner tables and leaves the handles of all the coffee cups at precisely the same angle.

“Alex,” I ask as he tucks in the sheets at the foot of his bed, “would you like a job?”

I expect him to parrot back, “Like a job?”

“A job to do,” he says, turning.

Alex has his work cut out for him. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the unemployment rate for American adults with disabilities was 13.3% at the beginning of this year, compared with 6.8% for adults without disabilities. Ac-
By Kate Palmer, MA, CCP and Lindsey Pfundstein, BA, QMHP

You are on the spectrum and searching for jobs. You’ve prepared your resume, practiced interview skills, written cover letters, applied for jobs. You also might have considered whether or not to disclose your diagnosis. If you were diagnosed as a child, then, growing up everyone around you already knew you were on the spectrum; telling new people can be difficult. Does your employer need to know?

You’ve worked at a job for a while and have had some trouble navigating workplace politics. Recently you’ve read about Autism Spectrum Disorders and decided to pursue a diagnosis. You were then diagnosed with an ASD. What next? Do you share the diagnosis with your employer and colleagues?

You’re a parent of a young adult with an ASD and you’ve been assisting your daughter/son prepare for a job. You know that you cannot attend a job interview with your young adult child, but you want to make sure that she/he is able to convey her/his challenges to her/his new employers. How do you help?

The Dilemma

Now, consider a subject you know nothing about. For example, I know nothing about surfing. If a surfer came up to me and began describing the names of particular surf moves, I would not understand what the surfer was talking about. This would make it considerably difficult to have a conversation or to communicate without a lesson in surfing. Next, imagine you have just told your boss or potential employer you have an ASD, a subject with which they are not familiar. Although Aspergers, Autism, PDD, Spectrum, ASD, Aspies, and Spectrumites are familiar jargon to most in the Autism Spectrum Community, these terms hold no concrete meaning to those outside that are not educated on the subject. They are now no closer to knowing or understanding you or what ASD is and how it affects your ability to work effectively and efficiently.

Self-Advocacy

The previous illustrations describe a lack of Common Ground. Common Ground means that the individuals in the discussion share the similar knowledge and experiences necessary for mutual understanding (Clark & Van Der Wege, 2002). If the people in the conversation do not share similar background understanding, as is the case with my awareness of surfing lingo, clear communication is not possible. So, instead of disclosing an ASD diagnosis with an employer or potential employer, who may or may not be familiar with the topic, consider finding the Common Ground.

In the workplace, the goal for both employers and employees is a successful, smooth operating business. In order to achieve this, employers need their employees to be as efficient as possible. As an individual with ASD, some challenges may make it more difficult to be the most productive on the job. This can be a stressful and anxiety producing situation. How does someone convey those challenges without having to disclose a diagnosis, which, as previously described, may not necessarily solve the issue?

In order for someone to convey her/his

see Disclosing on page 42
Walking a Tightrope of Conflicting Expectations

By Matthew J. Ratz, MEd Vocational Trainer

In my two professional roles—as an adjunct professor of English composition at a local community college and as a vocational trainer and curriculum developer for adults with autism—I encounter adults at all levels of job readiness. Many of the students in my English composition classes are working adults who are seeking advancement through education; they are sacrificing their time, their money, and their personal lives to secure credentials for professional growth. Many of the adult students who take classes where I teach would prefer not to work, but they must. On the other hand, many of the adults with autism for whom I develop training hold part-time, seasonal, or iterant jobs. Many of the individuals supported at the center where I am employed would prefer to work full-time, but they cannot.

To be frank, students enrolled in colleges and universities have, for the most part, the constitutions and the perseverance to land jobs and universities have, for the most part, the skills that the average college graduate brings to a career are markedly different from the skills brought to bear by adults with autism; however, each can contribute to a workplace in meaningful ways if given the chance.

The reality is: adults with autism and college graduates should not need to compete for the same jobs. There is a vast gap between these two parties’ skill sets. The skills that the average college graduate brings to a career are markedly different from the skills brought to bear by adults with autism; however, each can contribute to a workplace in meaningful ways if given the chance.

About My College Students

The students in the English composition classroom at our local community college fall along a wide spectrum themselves. Some of them are recent high school graduates, aged 18 or 19, but most are older adults returning to school. They are returning to school because they believe getting a formal education will make the difference between working in low-skilled, low-paid labor and securing a high-skilled, well-paying job. Having worked on both sides of the employment market—the low-skilled and the high-skilled—I, and being in a position, now, that allows me to screen applicants’ resumes and interview potential new-hires, I try as best I can to give sound, prescient advice about the job search and about one’s early career.

The employment landscape has changed dramatically since my own teachers and colleagues sought employment years ago. According to a Rutgers University study, only 50% of the Bachelor’s degree holding graduates from the class of 2011 secured full-time employment upon graduation. With record unemployment, a glut of applicants, and a dearth of entry-level jobs, the job market is really—to borrow a realtor’s term—a “buyer’s market” where employers have their picks and can choose the best, most-able applicants for each position.

The Skills Hiring Managers Seek

A 2013 survey from the National Association of Colleges and Employers ranked the top-ten skills hiring managers seek for their new hires. Seven “soft skills” surpass any job-specific, technical abilities on this list; these “soft skills” include the ability to:

- list; these “soft skills” include the ability to:

1. Communicate clearly and effectively.
2. Listen effectively.
3. Work well with others.
4. Manage time effectively.
5. Work independently.
6. Make decisions quickly.
7. Adapt to change quickly.
8. Be flexible.
9. Solve problems effectively.
10. Learn quickly.

But sitting at my desk now, six years later, I finally understand what my mother-in-law had figured out during that party. She didn’t know the terminology for sensory integration or regulation or self-stimulation, but she recognized a small boy who was overwhelmed and tired and sad. She didn’t need sophisticated language to diagnose why, but I think it had something to do with a deflating balloon. I vaguely recall them giggling and snatching and shrieking for it as the white circle drifted around the crowded kitchen.

I do remember I was hot and I do remember I was irritated. I remember I was tired of hearing my two boys scream and scratch at each other, tired of separating them again and again, fighting and kicking. I don’t even remember why, but I think it had something to do with a deflating balloon. I vaguely recall them giggling and snatching and shrieking for it as the white circle drifted around the crowded kitchen.

I do remember I was hot and I do remember I was irritated. I remember I was tired of hearing my two boys scream and scratch at each other, tired of separating them again and again. Finally, Joe put Jack in a timeout in the living room and instructed him to stay there.

Alone, he sat in the other room, screaming and crying as the rest of us shifted nervously in our chairs. Then all at once Joe’s mother got up, and walked determinedly over to where Jack sat. She picked him up and cradled him against her shoulder. With this in mind, I would like to tell all of the grandparents this:

Yes, there are unfamiliar terms like joint attention and IEP and theory of mind, but at the end of the day, it’s just you and this child. Do not be afraid. Deep down you already know these phrases/behaviors; you know when a child has had enough.

When your grandchild has autism, sometimes you’ll need to forgo the jacket.

Yes, you’ll need to accept what you can’t change and love them for who they are, but when your grandchild has autism, never forget that you have your own message to share and lessons to teach. Sing the lullabies and make the meatballs.

Autism has a lot of heartbeat, but many rewards. These gifts can be hard to see, and easy to miss: some days it’s just a quick goodby, a mouthful of ziti at dinner, a smile across the table. Some days, it may look like nothing more than a small boy standing next to you with his palms outstretched, waiting for his slice of a juicy yellow pear.

As the 1 in 88 age out of the public school system in the US, autism service providers and organizations are questioning how to best meet the workplace needs of adults of all ages with autism spectrum disorders. As a journalist diagnosed on the autism spectrum myself, I have had my fair share of both failure and success in my jobs. One factor that made my jobs work better were when they involved my special interest. Do special interest-focused jobs motivate other adults on the spectrum, too?

With this question in mind, I interviewed 24 other adults with ASD from the US as well as Canada, the UK, Australia, and Europe. This article explores special interest-focused jobs for adults on the spectrum and their role in helping some individuals on the spectrum to find meaningful and enjoyable careers. I cover participants' interests within and beyond technology fields, job creation from personal passions, and success in careers that value hyper-focus, “monologuing,” and specialized knowledge.

As an analytical, highly-knowledgeable person who is curious and self-motivated to explore topics of interest, Julia has qualities any employer would envy. Yet the United Kingdom 31-year-old Struggles with finding and keeping work. One of 24 adults with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) from around the globe that were interviewed, Julia faces a conundrum all-too-common for employees on the spectrum. Finding appropriate jobs for people with ASD is a pressing concern. “Entry level” jobs may prove difficult, discouraging us from working. Betina from Denmark told me one job “that did not fit my traits” was “being an assistant in institutions,” something the 59-year-old has tried several times. “I always end up being worn out and worse functioning, little by little, and getting sacked or having a nervous breakdown.”

79% of those I interviewed experienced undue difficulties in finding, handling, or keeping their jobs. These individuals were also smart, talented, and passionate. Diagnosed with ASD myself, I know how it feels to fail in the workplace. Yet with my passions at the heart of my job, I am motivated and successful. With a little creativity, any “special interest” (the intense passion for specific, often-unique subjects associated with autism) can become a career and yield an energetic and happy workforce out of those currently struggling in interpersonal, skill-heavy and unfulfilling jobs.

Instead of giving up, Betina followed her special interests. “My true wish would be to have all the time in the world for music, arts, research, writing, and teaching,” she shared. Because of her intense focus in these areas, Betina both excelled at and enjoyed her job as a music and art adult educator. And the others at her workplace recognized her abilities. “I was totally absorbed day and night and was regarded as a good teacher,” she explained.

Not Just Technology

The ocean of abilities and interests within the autism community reminds service providers to respect individuality during job coaching. What better way to personalize careers than fusing special interests and imagination? “I know my stuff when it comes to kids programs and books. I am serious,” said Emma. The 28-year-old Canadian who
How (and How Not) to Work with Employees with Autism or Asperger Syndrome

By Daniel Crofts, MA
Day Habilitation Assistant
Genesee County Chapter NYSARC

Imagine that you are a young person with Asperger Syndrome. You leave home and go off to college. Happily, you find that your new school is quite able to accommodate your needs (provided you advocate for yourself, of course). When you get a job, an attended crib, and extra time for testing, a note-taker in class, or another such support, you receive whatever you need in order to be successful.

Now fast forward a few more years. The game has changed. School’s over, and you have a job. The accommodations that helped you have a fair shot at success in the world of academia are no longer available. And whereas in college work and time management were as simple as making a list of what needed to get done, prioritizing each item appropriately, noting how much time you had for each assignment, and organizing your workload accordingly, you soon enough discover that it’s not quite that simple in the workplace.

Whether it is the subtleties of office communication, the complexity of the work and how it fits into the whole organization’s scheme of things, or, in many cases, the rapid pace, you find that the professional world does not so nicely suit your need for clear, manageable, unambiguous structure.

And perhaps worst of all, while there is always a learning curve in the workplace, it seems the same learning curve that applied in school does not apply here. You are expected to meet the organization’s standards on its terms and within its timeframe, not your own.

To be fair, schools and colleges have had the benefit of many years’ preparation and training in working with autism and other professional settings have not been similarly equipped. Hopefully, I can offer a few valuable insights in this regard.

The challenges the workplace presents to someone with Asperger Syndrome or as an executive function nightmare. Still, she believed that with modifications she could meet performance expectations. She presented the following accommodation requests to her supervisor and a human resources representative:

- Twice weekly meetings with her supervisor to discuss priorities, the best way to handle tasks, and how to be more efficient
- Explanations of the big picture to clarify why she was performing certain tasks
- Assignments given in writing (not verbally)
- Ability to review meeting notes taken by a colleague
- Instruction from a co-worker on how to organize files and her work space

In addition, Karen agreed to create an office of Disability Employment Policy. It’s website offers a wealth of information about the Americans with Disabilities Act, including guides with accommodation ideas for various disabilities.

Barbara Bissonnette is the Principal of Forward Motion Coaching (www.ForwardMotion.info). To request a free copy of The Employer’s Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome, send an email to Barbara@ForwardMotion.info. She specializes in career development coaching for individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome and provides training to organizations. She is the author of the award-winning Complete Guide to Getting a Job for People with Asperger’s Syndrome and the Asperger’s Syndrome Workplace Survival Guide: A Neuropathical’s Secrets for Success.
The Impact of Expressive, Receptive, and Pragmatic Language Deficits in the Workplace

By Tamara Sterling, MS, CCC-SLP, TSSLD
Speech-Language Pathologist

Most individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) have vocational strengths and are increasingly being hired by small businesses and corporate chains. ASD, by definition, is characterized by communication deficits. Once hired, these deficits present as challenges for individuals with ASD. Specifically, their expressive, receptive, and pragmatic language deficits can be barriers to effective job performance. Employers who are aware of these language deficits can provide accommodations and staff trainings that make employment adjustments easier for individuals with ASD.

Expressive language disorder impacts job performance. It is a communication disorder that affects the output of language and its indicators vary from person to person. Some individuals with ASD can have large vocabularies and adequate verbal skills (but struggle with using language in meaningful ways), while others have impaired verbal skills. A person with ASD processes language in a different way than a person who is neurotypical. This affects the way that they produce spoken and written language. Their brains function in atypical ways. The challenges and breakdowns in forming and expressing ideas, connecting words to their represented thoughts, and in processing language. Employees with ASD often demonstrate difficulties with word order, forming simple and complex utterances, word endings, using plurals, verb tense, and other grammatical aspects when they are engaged in a conversation or when they compose an email or other written documents. Semantics is also a barrier in spoken and written communication. Individuals with ASD are observed to have word finding and word meaning difficulties. They can be described as “talking in circles” and being unable to put words together to come to a point. People with ASD may not have the vocabulary or enough words in their repertoire to ask and answer questions. They may use vague and non-specific words such as “thing” or “that” thereby making their intended meaning unclear to their employers, coworkers, and customers. This disconnection between words and ideas leads to communication breakdowns. It then makes individuals with ASD feel frustrated because they may know the thought, idea, or feeling that they want to communicate, but they find it hard to express it. Some employees with ASD are nonverbal and communicate by using American Sign Language (ASL). They have barriers in communicating because employers, coworkers, and customers may not know ASL thereby creating a communication breakdown. Employees with ASD present with challenges in understanding spoken and written language. Difficulty understanding language is a receptive language disorder and it impacts job performance. Comprehension of spoken and written language is fundamental in the workplace. Understanding language is a complex undertaking. It requires individuals to attend, process language, and know word meanings. It is important that employers and coworkers do not misunderstand employees with ASD. They may appear to not be listening and to be uninterested in what is being said during meetings and throughout the work day. Employers and coworkers should look beyond what they observe and realize that employees with ASD present with impairments in attending, processing language, and knowing word meanings. This makes it difficult to keep up with the demands of spoken and written language. The ability to effectively follow directions is essential in the workplace. It requires working memory and processing skills. When employees with ASD are given verbal and written directions to complete a task, they have to store the task requirements into short term memory, process the task sequence, and then interpret and execute the task requirements. Employees with ASD are observed to struggle with following directions. In the workplace, it should be recognized that when employees with ASD do not respond appropriately, it is often because they are not sure how to proceed or how to respond appropriately. It is therefore important that employers, coworkers, and customers provide feedback and assistance to help employees with ASD understand their role in the workplace.

New York Daily News, adults with ASD “are becoming sought-after recruits at a handful of companies where their intense focus, attention to detail and ability to think differently is valued.” (June 4, 2013). Two of these industries include software producers and home financing companies, two areas where we have found success with our interns.

The “green technology” fields are starting to open and are an attractive option for people on the spectrum. In 2009, AHRC in Nassau County, NY, established this program to provide electronics recycling for the metro-NY area. The initial idea was to provide employment for the developmentally disabled and to also be competitive in this growing “green” industry. E-Works™ provides recycling, refurbishment and resale primarily in office electronics like computers, monitors, servers, scanners, copiers, etc. and also any other electronics like TVs, cell phones and video equipment. This company provides multi-level job opportunities including transport, warehousing, auditing, erasing data, repairing, disassembling, sorting and shredding. It, in addition, they have their own educational and training center where they teach potential employees the skills needed to go right into the job.

Work is not just a paycheck; it is part of our identity and an essential part of a fulfilling and independent life. Comprehensive vocational training along with finding the right employer-worker match provides a pathway to this goal.

“green technology” fields are starting a three year process which requires an integrated approach of independent living, social and vocational skills training. VIP starts students out with the assumption that there is a place for everyone in the workforce - but it takes more than work skills to be successful. The first year introduces the students to the career fields that are available and then evaluates their work readiness. A student can be technically skilled, but not able to manage their time or personal hygiene. Social skills training is in place for the students to learn effective communication and behavior with peers, coworkers and supervisors.

So, how does one find these “ideal” workplaces? According to an article in the New York Daily News, adults with ASD “are becoming sought-after recruits at a handful of companies where their intense focus, attention to detail and ability to think differently is valued.” (June 4, 2013).

References

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Kyle explains, “To be honest, I can say that it was a real improvement on my life. Prior to PSCA, I did not feel as involved in the world as much. Once I joined, I was able to expand [my capabilities].”

Ellen is hopeful and confident that her son’s intelligence and determination will change the way people view individuals with ASD. She states, “What I am really hoping for now is that other people, whether it is his co-workers, the train conductor, or the staff at the coffee shop, see him and other people with ASD differently. Or maybe as just the same.” She explains, “As parents of ASD children, we learn very quickly which programs are of value, and PSCA is one of them.”

To learn more about New York Collaborates for Autism please visit www.NYCA4.org or call 212-759-3775.
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The first are open-ended, like “Tell me about yourself” or “Why should I hire you.” The latter are meant to exclude you from the position. For example: “Are you willing to travel?” or “What are your salary requirements?” If you say you are not willing to travel, they’ll automatically disqualify you.

Do Your Research

Research will help you to prepare for the interviewer’s questions by gathering important information about the industry, company, salary, and position. The power of knowledge bestows confidence - something you’ll need to succeed in interviews. Find out about their needs and goals. What are they looking for in an ideal employee? Then, present yourself as a problem solver.

By researching the company you are applying to and similar company websites, you can find out what they are looking for and be better aware of experiences you have had that qualify you for this position. Researching similar positions will also give you salary information. You’ll be better informed about the market value of the skills and training that you bring to the table. This will help you maintain a positive attitude and negotiate with confidence.

When looking for industry, company, or salary data, the internet is your best source. It’s comprehensive, quick, and free. In addition to company websites, check out professional organizations and the myriad of job search resources. You can even search newspapers from various cities for job ads as well as articles about organizations you are interviewing with. Be aware, however, that much web information is biased. For example, while company websites give you much valuable information - the annual report, who the key people are, what public image they’re trying to present - they’ll only tell you what they want you to know. Always verify any information you find on the internet.

There are many tools available in your public or college library to help you with industry and company research. The librarians in the business division and the job information center of your public library can help you locate this information. The time you spend in research may be the extra push you need to get to the top of the candidate pool.

Prepare a Career Commercial

The career commercial is your answer to the most common interview question: “So, tell me about yourself.” Keep the answer short. Take only one minute to summarize your major career accomplishments. At the same time, you want to peak the interviewer’s interest in the tone, and direct the rest of the conversation.

Prepare your commercial by writing and revising until you get what you want, then memorize it. The repetitive speech patterns common to many spectrums will work well for you in this exercise. Practice in front of a mirror, checking your facial expression, gestures, and tone of voice. Of course, you’ll have to adapt it to different situations. Tweak it for various interviews, and use a more informal version at professional conferences, business meetings, and networking events.

Prepare Stories

In addition to the commercial, have on hand several short stories that illustrate your major achievements and showcase important skills. For example, many employers will ask how one would handle a difficult situation or a difficult customer. Prepare a story of how you handled such a situation. Use these stories to respond to the interviewer’s questions. Begin with an overview of a situation, then explain what you did and how you achieved the goal. Like your commercial, these stories can be prepared in advance. They should be clear and concise - usually less than a minute. Write, revise, and rehearse.

Prepare Questions to Ask

You know that during the face to face meeting, you should actively listen, respond with interest, and ask questions. But, just what questions should you ask?

Open-ended questions are best; they elicit information, you are seeking. Saturate the discussion along, and put you in control.

Choose your questions to determine the responsibilities of the position and the needs of the company. Before the interview, research your company, check out professional organizations and the myriad of job search resources. You can even search newspapers from various cities for job ads as well as articles about organizations you are interviewing with. Be aware, however, that much web information is biased. For example, while company websites give you much valuable information - the annual report, who the key people are, what public image they’re trying to present - they’ll only tell you what they want you to know. Always verify any information you find on the internet.

For example, the education heading of your resume lists your degrees, certificates, and continuing education courses. Your portfolio expands this information by offering course descriptions and certificates, providing evidence for the items listed on your resume.

Artists and models have been using portfolios for a long time, but almost any profession can do the same. In my library portfolio, I included samples of library brochures, pathfinders, and subject guides that I designed, samples of Intern Reflections and Intern Reviews, newspaper clippings about the library, and fliers advertising library events. Secretaries can include samples of correspondence, spreadsheets, and other projects. Teachers can include lesson plans, sample tests and student evaluations. Programmers can make a demonstration disk. Blueprints and finished products, such as machine parts, can also be included. Virtually anything you designed, developed or produced can be part of your portfolio. The possibilities are limitless. Be creative. The items you include should illustrate your unique style, ability, talents, and potential.

Career portfolios give you a competitive edge; this is particularly important for individuals on the autism spectrum. By showing off your work, you take the emphasis off your personality. Remember, the portfolio is a sales tool. Analyze the audience (the company you want to work for). What do they want? How do your skills and supportive documentation meet the prospective employer’s needs?

When applying for a job or a promotion, mention your portfolio in the cover letter. Once you have landed an interview, prepare. Look over your portfolio, and decide which items are most appropriate for the company and assignment you are interviewing for.

Bring your portfolio to the interview and have it ready. When the interviewer asks what you would like to say, answer short. Take only one minute to answer short. Take only one minute to:

- Tell about your accomplishments and benefit questions until the end of the interview if you ask them all.
- Asking too early in the game gives the impression that your main interest is dollars, not the challenge or opportunity of serving the company.

At the end of the meeting ask, “How successful was your interview?” This question makes your interest in the job evident, lets you know the time frame they are working with, and allows you to tailor your follow-up strategy.

Most candidates don’t realize that they’re judged not only by their answers, but also by their questions. Smart questions help you get a better feel for the job. They also show your enthusiasm to the employer.

Make the Interview into Show and Tell

A career portfolio can showcase your professional achievements. While a resume outlines your skills and abilities, a portfolio displays the results of your work, offering the prospective employer a vision of what you can do as a spectrum individual, this is even more important. You must compensate for impaired social ability by excelling in your field. The portfolio sells your work rather than your personality. It shifts the focus off you to your accomplishments.

For example, the education heading of your resume lists your degrees, certificates, and continuing education courses. Your portfolio expands this information by offering course descriptions and certificates, providing evidence for the items listed on your resume.

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participants have worked the land, built friendships and developed a sense of community. James, an environmental science college student, loved his time on the farm, especially the camaraderie he felt working side by side with other volunteers and staff. According to James, “I developed a sense of responsibility to complete the assigned tasks and, as a result, I gained a greater sense of confidence.” He added, “I really liked learning about healthy eating and I even introduced my family to new fruits and vegetables.” Michael K., another Compass participant, enjoyed learning about farming, nutrition and the tasks necessary to keep a farm running. “I decided to start a small garden of my own at home. I like to see the plants grow.” For three years, Michael F. has volunteered on the farm. His love and passion for working there and the friendships he formed gave him new skills and confidence. While he continues to volunteer there, he now has a paying job at ShopRite. According to Dan Holmes, “Beyond the work that they did, it is important for the Farm that everyone work together as a tight community, and they fit in very well with everyone. At the same time, I and the other workers were reminded that every one of us has different abilities and disabilities. It is a good lesson for all of us and helps us work better together.”

JCCA job coaches assess every individual while providing each with pre-vocational support, services and coaching on site until the intern is able to work independently. JCCA staff works closely with employers to maintain an open line of communication to ensure a successful working relationship. “Compass coaches assess the skills and interests of all participants to give them a valuable internship experience tailored to their career goals. When our interns succeed, we succeed. It is an amazing feeling to see them grow in confidence and ability,” emphasizes Compass Coach, Skylar Friedman Conway.

Trevor, 25, who has a developmental disability and other physical and medical issues, lives independently in White Plains. He wanted to work with mechanics and was placed at J and J Presto as a gas station attendant and mechanic’s assistant in White Plains, NY. But his new boss, Jim, had no experience working with people with disabilities and wasn’t sure if it would be a good fit for his business. Trevor explains, “This was the job I really wanted. I was so happy to be given the opportunity to ‘live my dream.’” Compass coaches supported Trevor on- and off-site. Today Jim says, “Now that we have been working together for almost a year, I have come to know, value and understand Trevor. Now he is just ‘one of the guys.’” Compass worked with Trevor, Jim and counselors to make the position paid and permanent. Since then, Trevor has had a raise, learned how to do oil changes and change tires. Overcoming multiple learning differences and some physical restrictions, Trevor continues, “I have gained a lot of confidence and learned how to be successful in the workplace.” This is due in large part to his positive attitude and the support of an employer who has learned that hiring people with learning differences is not as challenging as he originally thought. A few weeks ago, Trevor came in to a weekly coaching session with a huge smile on his face and said, “I’m so proud. I now have a uniform!” Trevor’s story is a testament to his own determination, the support of his employer and the skill and dedication of the Compass staff.

Group Internships

Group internships help participants who need a greater level of support. They offer the opportunity to observe participants’ work-readiness skills in a more supportive environment to help develop social and vocational skills.

The Food Bank for Westchester

The Food Bank for Westchester is the core of the county’s emergency food distribution network. It solicits, acquires, warehouses and distributes food to more than 265 food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters as well as adult, childcare and treatment centers to some 200,000 Westchester children, seniors and their families who are hungry or at-risk of hunger.

“Trevor has been with us for almost a year, I have come to know, value and understand Trevor. Now he is just ‘one of the guys.'” — Compass worked with Trevor, Jim and counselors to make the position paid and permanent.

The Food Bank of Westchester's support of healthy eating and its dedication to providing nutritious food to those in need is a significant asset to the community. The Food Bank is committed to offering a variety of healthy options to those in need and is an integral part of the Westchester community. The Food Bank's dedication to serving those in need, combined with the support of their partners and volunteers, is a testament to the community's commitment to addressing hunger and promoting healthy eating.
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in life is to be one of the best and well-known DNs in my area.

Customer Service/Retail

I recently started working part-time at a local independent movie theater that shows films such as documentaries and independent films. I have been working at this job for about two months now, and I am really enjoying it. My job duties consist of cashing, ticket handling, and helping out at Landmark, I also wash and wax aircraft at the local flight school to make their airplanes look spic-and-span for customers. With my internship at Landmark Aviation and work at the local flight school, I hope to build upon my experiences to gain more knowledge of the aviation industry. My goal is to own and manage my own airport. I am now able to live without my parents or other assistance in various areas. I’ve improved greatly in a variety of ways: cooking, cleaning, social, and financial. CIP’s services have helped me become independent, live happily, and become the person who I am today.

This article has been reprinted with permission from the January/February 2014 issue of Autism Asperger’s Digest, a bimonthly magazine on autism published by Future Horizons, Inc. www.autisms digest.com.

Jay Mikush has two siblings and a dog named Banjo. He loves skiing, riding roller coasters, flying airplanes, mobile DJing, biking, singing, karaoke, swimming, hanging out with friends, and listening to and writing music.

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interview, job search, etc.) and a capacity to perform the job. Not all these jobs require a college degree but can provide a “good job” for someone with skills. I am not dismissing or minimizing the value of a college education; I am stating that there are alternatives that can provide a student on the spectrum with opportunities that may have gone unnoticed.

This article was originally published in the spring 2014 issue of the Asperger and High Functioning Autism Association’s (AHA) print publication, On The Spectrum.

Nicholas A. Villani is the President of Career and Employment Options, Inc. (CEO), a consulting service for school districts and an ACCES/VR provider for the Metropolitan Region. He is an adjunct at Dowling College since 1997 teaching Transition Services in Special Education at the graduate level. He has over 30 years of experience in employment services for students and adults with autism. For more information, please visit www.cceincworks.com.

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“We Learned About Your Organization in Autism Spectrum News!”

Language from page 31
to directives, it is not that they are displaying insubordination. Instead, it should be realized that the employee with ASD is having a communication breakdown in processing the directive. They may have been focusing on the first step of the directive and may not have been attending to the subsequent steps. They may have short-term memory impairment that prevented them from storing the task requirements. Perhaps, the employee with ASD could not adequately process the directive and this impeded them from executing the commands. Challenges with semantics may have played a role. The employee with ASD may have a weak understanding of word meanings and this inhibited them from carrying out the directive.

Pragmatic impairment is a hallmark of ASD. Individuals with ASD present with nonverbal and verbal language challenges. These communication deficits vary from person to person and impact how employees with ASD function socially. Some nonverbal language challenges are inappropriate eye contact during conversations, inadequate interpretation of social cues, and poor adherence to the social rules of proximity. Establishing and maintaining eye contact can be challenging for individuals with ASD.

In the workplace, employees with ASD may not look at their conversational partner while speaking. It is important that employers and coworkers do not misinterpret limited eye contact as shyness, lack of interest, or untrustworthiness. Instead, they should understand that workers with ASD often find it uncomfortable to establish and maintain eye contact while conversing. Employees with ASD often lack the ability to interpret social cues because they often lack social problem solving and perspective-taking skills. They do not adequately read nonverbal signals to gauge their listeners’ interest in their conversation. Individuals with ASD often do not understand and respect personal boundaries. They are often observed to not adjust their proximity to their conversational partners. In the workplace, they may violate a person’s personal space by standing too close when they speak.

Employees with ASD are often not flexible with routine changes. They function best with established routines. Examples include having a fixed shift, number of hours of work, break/lunch time, meeting time and location, procedures to complete task, work area, location of supplies, and location of supervisor. Having a set routine makes them better employees and reduces their anxiety. Individuals with ASD often use verbal language in atypical ways. They often have challenges in initiating, maintaining, and terminating a conversation. Some employees with ASD will not be the first to start a conversation or greet their managers and coworkers. Poor topic maintenance and limited social reciprocity make maintaining a conversation problematic. The conversations do not flow effectively. Workers with ASD may abruptly switch topics without signaling that the topic has changed, their utterances can be tangential and irrelevant to the topic, and they may not carryout adequate listener-speaker roles (i.e. talk while someone else is talking). Their responses to “WH” questions (who, what, where, etc.) can be non-contingent to the question. An employee with ASD may engage in a conversation and then suddenly and inappropriately terminate the conversation.

During the work day, individuals with ASD may discuss topics that are not appropriate for the workplace, and can be blunt and too honest during a conversation. Their challenge lies in inflexible social adjustment. They demonstrate difficulty with adjusting their conversation to match the conversational partner and the context. Perseveration and echolalia are apparent in some employees with ASD. They are often observed to perseverate on topics they are passionate about. They may talk continuously about trains, baseball, dinosaurs, say hello numerous times a day, and repeatedly ask the same questions. This can be disruptive in the workplace. Employers, coworkers and customers may not be interested in the topic or may have heard the same information several times before, and may also find it bothersome to repeatedly give the same answer to the same question. It is important for employers and coworkers to know that workers with ASD perseverate on topics because doing so reduces anxiety and it is their way of contributing to a social; it is their way of contributing to a social conversation.

Another verbal repetitive behavior is echolalia. This is when individuals with ASD continuously repeat set phrases, lines from a movie, or phrases that they heard recently or some time ago. This is also an anxiety reducing method and a social contribution. Individuals with ASD often do not understand humor and respond to figurative language in literal ways. If someone tells a joke, the employee with ASD may not see the humor, nor have an appreciation for the humor. They often cannot interpret humor and figurative language because some of them are concrete thinkers and have literal interpretations for abstract language.

Employees with ASD are valuable additions to the workforce. As an increasing number of them are being hired, it is imperative that employers provide accommodations for workers with ASD and continuous staff development on ASD. Some strategies and accommodations that can reduce communication barriers and support employees with ASD include:

• Use simple spoken and written language to facilitate word meaning deficits.
• Repeat directions (gives ample chances to store, process, and interpret information).
• Reduce directives into smaller steps.
• Provide increased response time to facilitate word finding challenges and to process spoken and written language.
• Use visual and auditory prompts to indicate routine changes.
• Give several advance notices about schedule and routine changes.
• Hold frequent staff trainings about ASD and how to tailor the work day to meet the needs of employees with ASD.
• Implement ASL training.
• Hire/consult with a Speech-Language Pathologist to treat workplace communication barriers.

Tamara Sterling, M.S. CCC-SLP
TSSLD is a Speech-Language Pathologist to treat workplace communication barriers.
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from this survey, UJA-Federation enlisted the help of appropriate collaborators from across this network — including Jewish community centers, human service agencies, camps, hospitals, and others — asking them to create a vision of new infrastructures and holistic programming that would increase the independence and community inclusion of young adults with ASD in both the Jewish and larger community.

Beyond the idea of five agencies, the Edith and Carl Marks Jewish Community House of Bensonhurst, Mid-Island Y Jewish Community Center, Sid Jacobson Jewish Community Center, The Jewish Community Center in Manhattan, and Westchester Jewish Community Services were given small grants to plan intensive-ly how to develop their vision into actual programming for individuals with ASD. Six months later, all of the agency plans were funded by UJA-Federation for imple-mentation. Though each model is slightly different and designed to address specific local needs, all of the programs are based on the premise that individuals on the spect-rum can be successful in their workplace and can sustain those jobs when:

- Strong and lasting relationships are built with local employers. Asset-foc-used and support-based outreach and education help to build a cadre of busi-nesses that are willing to advocate on behalf of individuals with ASD. When employers can talk to other employers about hiring this cohort, they can com-municate that individuals on the spect-rum hold unique talents and strengths that make them specifically qualified for certain job responsibilities. This is not an act of charity; it’s good busi-ness. Beyond employers, other em-ployees must also be educated on understanding and being sensitive to diversity, including individuals on the spectrum. Educational workshops and peer mentor programs among col-leagues can increase social integration for the individual with ASD in the workplace.

- Vocational preparation includes work-place social skills training. The most significant barrier to individuals with ASD getting and keeping a job does not revolve around an inability to do the job, but rather, an inability to so-cialize appropriately on the job. One such challenge is that social skills taught in school to individuals with ASD, such as interacting with peers and speaking one’s mind, did not translate to a work environment where one has to interact with supervisors and colleagues, and operate in client situations and meetings. Therefore, it is essential that training for individu-als with ASD moves beyond concrete tasks and hard job skills. This means that social skills curricula for navigat-ing the workplace must be created and used in conjunction with traditional methods of vocational training.

- Individuals with ASD are matched with suitable jobs and workplace environ-ments. Individuals with ASD should not be placed in a job just because it happens to be open. A comprehensive vocational assessment is one step in the long process of getting to know an individual’s interests, goals, and vision in pursuit of a fulfilling work-place match. Most individuals with ASD were dissatisfied with their em-ployment because it didn’t match their skills or interests.

- Ongoing job support is provided. Matching an individual to a job is not the end of the process, but the begin-ning. Obtaining a job does not equate with maintaining a job and, in fact, they require different skills. After a service provider offers help in build-ing skills, strengthening emotional intelligence and brokering relation-ships with employers, they must then work with individuals and employers to maintain learned skills, support and restore emotional resiliency, and mediate unexpected conflicts that arise in the workplace.

Work is a rewarding experience and a pathway to feeling productive, contrib-uting to the world and finding a purpose in everyday life. Individuals with ASD have the potential to be excellent employ-ees, appreciated by staff and management alike. These individuals are also equally deserving of the opportunity to find their own passion and purpose through work. Through employer education, specific social skills training, individualized job matching processes, and ongoing support, adults with ASD can live the independent life they want in a community that is in-clusive and appreciative of their strengths.

Melanie Goldberg, LMSW is Planning Associate of the Caring Commission at the UJA-Federation of New York. For more in-formation, please visit www.ujafedny.org/ support-for-family-caregivers.

List of States with Autism Insurance Reform

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NYC Overload from page 5

“New York City Overload”

Written and performed by the Miracle Project NYC

New York City overload
New York City overload
New York City overload
New York City

It’s stupid loud in New York
There’s such a crowd in New York
There’s so much noise and honest oys (OY!)
You can’t keep your noize

Too many rats in New York
And Fat Cats in New York
Crammed into this stinky train

It’s too much for my brain
There’s a premium on space so
pigeon get outta my face
You gotta find your place in New York

New York City overload
New York City

Life is rough in New York
Folks are tough in New York
So hey, we got some attitude- it’s honest, it ain’t rude
I’ve always been in New York
And school’s a joke in New York
But that depends
You gotta do what you gotta do
AND WATCH OUT FOR THAT POO!

In this town you can get around
If you’re a help a geek or a dork
You gotta find your place
in New York

New York City overload
New York City overload
I THINK I’M GONNA EXPLODE!

I’ll be a star in New York
Don’t need a car in New York
The food is great, it’s the empire state and
the people are first rate!
So you can have your cheesecake
eat it too
With a plastic deli spork
You got to find your place
In New York!

So plug your ears and close your eyes,
Too much external stimuli
The sights, the sounds, the smells, the
PIES...

You gotta find your place in New Yoooorrrk. (TAXI!?)

The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation (www.djfiddlefoundation.org) develops, advocates for and funds programs, re-sources and public policy that benefit the diverse population of adults living with Autism. Visit our website to contact us and learn more about our national initiatives.

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Autism Society of Minnesota

Coming from a different angle than those organizations already described, the Autism Society of Minnesota (AuSM) seeks to ensure that attention and community resources are given to employment initiatives for people with autism. Executive Director Jonath Weinberg reports that AuSM is focused on the limited knowledge employers have about autism, and is working to get and keep employers engaged in the potential that the adult autism community can bring to the workforce. At the state level, AuSM has launched partnerships with government agencies and private businesses with the goal to expand employment opportunities for individuals with ASD. AuSM is exploring ways to set a standard and a template that companies can follow, in an effort to create inclusive workplaces. AuSM provides opportunities for employers, human resource recruiters and hiring managers to learn about autism through webinars, customized consultation, and an informational booklet (Overlooked Talent: Investing in Employees with Autism). Additionally, AuSM facilitates roundtable discussions and an annual Autism and Employment forum to develop solutions and strategies that can break down barriers to jobs. These forums provide a highly visible platform to highlight and celebrate corporations (3M, Best Buy, Cargill, Target and Walgreens) that are finding ways to proactively incorporate individuals with ASD into their workforce. The Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities website hosts “Meet the Future Face of Employment: Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Technology Fields” (www.mndde.org/asd-employment). The website lists specific actions that individuals can take to facilitate the education, training, and employment processes that result in tech careers for individuals with ASD.

Specialisterne Midwest

While organizations like WI-BPDD and MLC are preparing individuals for employment and AuSM is working with employers to open doors to opportunities, Specialisterne is supporting individuals on the job through a consultant model. Many individuals with autism have a special aptitude for STEM careers (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). Utilizing individuals with ASD in the technology industry has been successful in Denmark where entrepreneur Thorgil Sonne founded Specialisterne (http://specialisterne.com/). In this model, individuals with ASD are employees of Specialisterne and consultants in the companies in which they are placed to work. Some companies do not feel equipped or understand how to meet the needs of individuals with special needs. These companies can contract with Specialisterne to fill job positions. Specialisterne matches the unique skill sets of individuals with ASD with businesses who are in need of employees with those skills. This model allows companies to diversify the workforce and get a valuable worker while minimizing their anxiety about supports. Specialisterne makes it possible for individuals with ASD to excel in the workplace.

Specialisterne USA is driving the nationwide expansion of the proven international job creation and employment concept. Sonne, a father of a son with ASD, is partnering with a team in the Midwest. Specialisterne Midwest is headquartered in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, and is comprised of Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. Sonne, President of Specialisterne USA, believes there is much opportunity in the US to create meaningful and productive jobs for the growing number of people diagnosed with ASD. Specialisterne Midwest has plans to assess and identify people with autism, and then employ them as consultants providing valuable services to corporate clients in sectors including IT, telecommunications, software and science/engineering. Executive director Tony Thomann is moving forward with the first cohort in Fargo North Dakota where consultants will be placed in positions of software testing and quality assurance. This organization has a goal to enable one million jobs globally, and 100,000 jobs in the US, for people with autism.

In conclusion, there are numerous barriers to employment for individuals with ASD. It takes many organizations getting involved and multiple strategies to improve opportunities for employment. The programs highlighted in this article, demonstrate the types of preparation and on-going supports being utilized to enhance employment outcomes for people with autism. Through programs such as the ones described in this article, individuals with autism are being empowered to use their talents and interests to attain and sustain employment.

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For more information on Autism Society of Minnesota (AuSM), contact Jonath Weinberg, Executive Director at (651) 647-1083, email jweinberg@auasm.org or visit www.auasm.org.

For more information on Minnesota Life College (MLC), contact Amy Gudmestad, Executive Director at (608) 266-1166, email amy.gudmestad@mlnlifecollege.org or visit www.mlnlifecollege.org.

For more information on Specialisterne Midwest, contact Executive Director Tony Thomann at tony.thomann@specialisterne.com or visit http://usa.specialisterne.com.

For more information on Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities (WI-BPDD), contact Beth Swedeen, Executive Director at (608) 266-1166, email beth.swedeen@wisconsin.gov or visit www.letsgettoworkwi.org or www.wi-bpdd.org.

References


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- Brand recognition: Who is the company’s customer base? Does the workforce reflect the characteristics of the company’s customer base, enhancing the company’s reputation in their markets and creating brand loyalty?

- Fulfillment of social mission: What are the social responsibility goals of the employer? Does hiring a particular individual advance the social responsibility goals of the company?

In the private sector these are questions professionals who work in the recruiting field consider when evaluating a job candidate. When the candidate is presented to the hiring manager, the recruiter can speak not only to their technical skills, but also to the intangible benefits that the candidate will offer the company. For vocational rehabilitation to improve its placement rates, this private sector focus on the intangible benefits a candidate brings to the company needs to be considered. But that is not enough.

The challenge of the vocational rehabilitation world includes an element that most private sector recruiters do not encounter – how does one present the benefits and challenges of a potential employee’s disability in a way that the employer can understand and feel confident about being able to accommodate? For individuals on the autism spectrum, the challenges themselves can be very different for each person, both in their nature and severity. In order to engage employers in hiring individuals with an ASD, the vocational rehabilitation system needs to become a partner with the business world, providing a full service solution to including people with autism in their organizations.

At ASTEP, our mission is to increase the quality of life for individuals with Asperger Syndrome (AS) and high functioning autism (HFA) through suitable and sustainable employment. Our goal is to be the bridge between individuals with AS/HFA, the professionals and organizations that support them and employers. ASTEP strives to open up a highly skilled and loyal, yet untapped, talent pool for employers, resulting in increased employment of individuals with AS/HFA. In working with employers, we see a growing interest in hiring people on the spectrum, a continuing skepticism about their capability to do so successfully, and a desire to work with a partner who supports them through the entire process. With this understanding, ASTEP has created a program to improve the employment opportunities and outcomes for individuals with autism. ASTEP’s end-to-end solution provides an employer with assessment services, education and training tools, recruiting services and ongoing support for employees and managers. This full service model, driven by employers’ hiring needs, should lead to an increase in the placement of people with autism into suitable and sustainable employment.

Each component of this model is equally important in ensuring success for the employee on the spectrum.

- Assessment includes working with employers to examine and develop appropriate job descriptions, evaluating the employer’s hiring needs against each potential candidate’s skills, addressing the non-technical considerations an employer has when hiring, conducting first level screening interviews of candidates, and providing interviewing and onboarding accommodation recommendations.

- Education and training include offering products and services that teach the employer how to recruit, interview, onboard, delivery performance management reviews, address legal and regulatory compliance issues, mitigate hiring risks, and troubleshoot employee relations problems with their employees on the spectrum. It also includes interviewing and social skills training for employees with an ASD, to help individuals function better in the workplace.

- Recruiting is focused on presenting highly qualified candidates for each position the employer needs filled. ASTEP serves as the bridge between the professionals and organizations supporting individuals on the spectrum and the employers, to source qualified candidates.

- Ongoing employment support, for both the employee on the spectrum and their employer, is the glue that makes this model strong. The length of support needed will be different for each placement, but everyone involved in that placement needs to be willing to make sure the employee receives the coaching and mentoring they need, and that the employer has a “go to” person who can answer their questions about the employee and how to manage them successfully.

Many vocational rehabilitation organizations have built a robust process around a person-focused evaluation and placement model. This is critically important in making sure the individual is placed in a job that is appropriate for their skill sets and interests. It is equally important, however, to build an employer-focused placement model, which is integrated with the person-focused model, in order to improve the placement rates for individuals with autism.

The Asperger Syndrome Training and Employment Partnership (ASTEP) is a non-profit organization whose mission is to improve the quality of life for individuals with Asperger Syndrome (AS) and high functioning autism (HFA) through suitable and sustainable employment. ASTEP acts as the bridge between individuals with AS/HFA, the professionals and organizations that support them and employers. ASTEP strives to open up a highly skilled and loyal, yet untapped, talent pool for employers, resulting in increased employment of individuals with AS/HFA. For more information on ASTEP please visit our website at www.asperger-employment.org.

Daniel Crofts is a 29-year-old man with Asperger Syndrome. He has an MA in English/Literature from the State University of New York College at Brockport and experience in the fields of freelance journalism, substance abuse prevention, online higher education, and service to people with developmental disabilities. He may be contacted at danielcrofts31@yahoo.com.

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“Aspie” can be very good at attention to details, but other things – especially pertaining to unwritten or unspoken expectations – may get filtered out. Likewise, for the Aspie who thrives on a more relaxed pace, the demand for faster output can cause stress and, potentially, burn-out.

All things considered, the person with an ASD is more likely than most to face workplace pressure and a lower sense of self-worth, working hard and doing his or her best while coming to feel as though s/he is doing little or nothing right.

Having said all this, I’d like to offer a few suggestions to employers who currently, or may in the future, work with ASD employees:

1. Be open to unlooked-for niches. People with ASDs are very capable and valuable employees (many famously intelligent and successful people were said to have been on the spectrum). But they may require some flexibility – the kind that allows their employers to say, for example: “Herb has a hard time with X, but he does very well with Y. Perhaps he should be given responsibilities more consistent with Y.” With ASD diagnoses on the rise, there are more of these people coming into the workforce. And that little extra patience and investment on your part will not only enable such people to be successful (it has proven invaluable to me in my own professional experience), but may in the long run produce remarkable returns you never expected.

2. Try to be as specific as possible with assignment expectations, deadlines, and what you and the organization need from your ASD employee. Don’t just assume that they will intuit these things from the way your particular workplace…well, works, because that might not come as naturally to them.

3. Remember that you are working with people, not machines. People are diverse, not uniform; they cannot all fit into a planned “scheme” of operation.

For employers and for job-seekers on the spectrum, I would also recommend getting a hold of Stephen Shore’s book “Beyond the Wall: Personal Experiences with Autism and Asperger Syndrome.” In chapter 12, Shore includes a sample letter identifying certain supports that can help facilitate a productive professional relationship between an employer and his/her ASD employee.

Not every person with an ASD is the same, and different people will both face and present different challenges. But these are some general guidelines that I hope will be useful, even if only to kick-start a much needed discussion.

Daniel Crofts is a 29-year-old man with Asperger Syndrome. He has an MA in English/Literature from the State University of New York College at Brockport and experience in the fields of freelance journalism, substance abuse prevention, online higher education, and service to people with developmental disabilities. He may be contacted at danielcrofts31@yahoo.com.
Entrepreneur from page 22

as a non-profit corporation in New York State with the mission to develop job skills and employment opportunities for young women with autism. Our first venture is Girl AGain, which opened on February 8, 2014 in Hartsdale, NY.

Teaching to Work

I want to use Girl AGain as a realistic environment to teach people how to work in a business. This would then prepare them for employment in a business. High schools now are incorporating internships as part of their transition programming but I had concerns about what high school teachers actually knew about what was needed in business. (It’s no longer part of public education to have a vocational program).

My daughter’s transition program includes internships. I suggested that her teacher make a list of the skills she needed to learn for the workplace and begin teaching and incorporating those skills as part of her academic experience. For example in the work world, most jobs require collaboration with colleagues, yet in my daughter’s academic program she hardly had any group assignments – never a project that she had to do at home over a weekend with 3 other students. Shouldn’t she be under-taking collaborative work in school to prepare her for the work place?

Since high school internships are typically the student’s first exposure to work, they tend to focus on the task that needs to be done, not on the business. A lot of the focus is on specific social behavior in the workplace – which is needed.

In a sample size of one, this was “validated” when I observed my daughter in her internships this fall. I had asked her if she knew why she was putting labels on shopping bags for a store she went to weekly from school with a job coach. She did not know why. It was just a task. But she liked being in the store because it was a small woman’s boutique with lots of fashion accessories, and lots of pink.

We take it for granted that we know that a shopping bag is an advertising device and that advertising helps bring more customers to the store which leads to sales and profits, which is what keeps the store in business. We take it for granted that if a person who made a purchase is carrying a shopping bag with a brand name they are implicitly making an endorsement, which helps the store.

Since this is not concrete some people need to be taught explicitly. I asked if she knew why the bags needed labels anyway – why weren’t the bags printed with the store logo? Did she understand it was a business decision that probably was driven by cost? (This would make a good math class problem to figure out the cost difference between preprinted bags and hand labeling plain bags with free labor.)

I have noticed that for people with ASD the question “why” does not come up too often. They don’t ask it and have a hard time answering it. “Why” is the key to generalization. “Why” helps put context around something that might seem isolated.

“Why” helps people understand and to even think of alternatives, possibilities, options. This is how we can take a seemingly insignificant task like putting labels on bags and making it significant for helping a business achieve its goals, which is the function of work.

Why at Girl AGain

In the Girl AGain boutique, I had two workers take photos of each outfit. One of the workers did not want to remove the plastic bags – yes it was extra work – so I had to explain why we get a better detailed photo that would not only be a document for us but it would be a promotion tool – we would put these photos on Pinterest so that people who can’t come to the store might be so enticed by the beautiful outfit that they would want to purchase online. We will now have a new rule in our process: take a photo of an outfit before putting the plastic bag over the hanger. Why? for better quality photo for advertising.

Putting hang tags on the clothes – I had to explain that you put the tag hanging on the back of the outfit so that people first see the item, decide they like it and then look at the price – this is a better sales strategy. I can establish the rule: hang tags go to the back. But understanding why will help them to transfer this to other situations.

One worker, who is a friend of my daugh- ter’s did not think of me as the manager. I asked her to do something and she said no. I asked her again and she refused again. She thought it was funny. I explained that we are not here to joke and her response was “I want to have fun when I work.”

Now I realize I need to teach that the purpose of work is to accomplish a business objective not a personal objective. At work the individual is no longer the focus.

This venture is not just the employees with autism learning to work; I have a lot to learn about being an autism employment entrepreneur.

Girl AGain is a resale boutique for American Girl dolls and is located at 157 South Central Avenue in Hartsdale, NY. 10530 Please like us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/GirlAGainBoutique. For more information, please contact Maryjorie at (914) 428-1258 or mjmadfis@gmail.com.

Training from page 8

Through this program it has been clear that given the proper support, individuals with autism can succeed and become valued employees. According to one manager, “Once we fully understand the capabilities and unique needs of individuals with ASD, their passion, motivation and ability to work can truly blossom.”

“NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital/Westchester provides inpatient and outpatient psychiatric services for children, adolescents, adults and the elderly. For more information, call 1-888-694-5700 or visit us at www.nyp.org/psychiatry.”
Autism Spectrum News 2014

Theme and Deadline Calendar

Summer 2014 Issue:
“Autism and Mental Health Services”
Deadline: June 5, 2014

Fall 2014 Issue:
“Exploring Relationships and Social Skills”
Deadline: September 5, 2014

Winter 2015 Issue:
“The Importance of Scientific Research”
Deadline: December 5, 2014

Spring 2015 Issue:
“Addressing the Challenging Behaviors Associated with Autism”
Deadline: March 5, 2015

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Expectations from page 28

... work on a team, make decisions, strategic executive functioning (planning, prioritizing, and organizing tasks), solve problems, and communicate verbally. These are skills, according to employers, that new college graduates most need to demonstrate in order to achieve success in a wide array of career fields; these are the skills, according to employers, that, when clearly demonstrated on cover letters and resumes, will secure interviews for applicants time after time. To repeat, of the top ten skills, the first seven and the last one are not specific to the job, but are “soft skills” and appropriate workplace behaviors.

... The good news for recent grads is this: the top skills employers are seeking can be learned and practiced both inside and outside the classroom. Knowing how to plan and prioritize tasks, for instance, is not the domain of one particular major or another. The bad news is this: if one lacks these skills, he’s going to have a really hard time securing well-paid employment.

Adults With Autism Are Not So Different

Adults with autism, at the end of the day, want the same thing all adults want. Regardless of their disability, their impaired social interaction and communication skills, and their areas of perseveration, adults with autism, while needing varying degrees of support and accommodation, want the same thing all adults want. Respectfully, people will surprise you if given the opportunity. This axiom has proven true in the years I have spent supporting adults with autism. The individuals I work with never stop surprising me, but it is because I am open to them doing so. I create opportunities for these individuals to reveal their strengths, talents, and interests. I am open to being surprised. I am expecting to be surprised. And this is the best kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. When given an opportunity to show their skills on a job, most of the adults I have worked with can rise to the challenge. They will often need support and accommodation, but they can rise to the challenge. Of course, they need to be let in the door.

Matthew Ratz, MEd, is a vocational trainer for adults with autism. For more information, email mjratz@gmail.com or visit www.harnessthepromise.com.

References


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Integrating from page 29

Expert Knowledge

Intensity isn’t a detriment. During a crisis, I’d want a rescue worker like Matt around because he has his heart in the job. The 20-year-old Canadian counts “helping others” and emergency services among his special interests. “It is a great experience,” Matt said of his involvement in volunteer firefighting and the auxiliary police. “Along with helping others, you feel that you’re a part of something by being on scene.”

Easing Career Changes

Katherine used to love how her job fit into her special interests, “but after working at it for thirteen years, I’m over it.” Changes are tough for anyone, even without autism’s deep need for routine. Katherine is not having a crisis, however, about what to do next. She’s just turning to her other special interests: “I would like to be able to knit and make jewelry well enough to make a living doing only that.” Katherine used her special interests to her advantage to make a graceful transition between fields. Currently a subject matter expert in First Nations treaty negotiations, Zachary also used this underplayed adaptive strategy. By working in the theater, the foreign service, and private practice for law and medicine, Zachary has explored law, medicine, politics, theater, and travel - all of his special interests.

Loving Our Life and Livelihood

Perhaps most importantly, an engaging career improves quality of life for adults on the autism spectrum. “I’d love to just raise ornamental and edible plants,” said Shay of career ideas beyond horticultural therapy and landscape architecture. “I think it would be dreamy to work at a botanical garden or in some sort of urban center.”

Listen to the passion in her voice: her job would be “dreamy”; she’d “love” it.

24-year-old Niklaas, who hails from the Netherlands, likes his current work in bookkeeping and accounting. “My job has to do with numbers and with the economy, two things I am very interested in,” he said. “Because of this, my job keeps being interesting for me and enjoyable to do.”

Future from page 26

* “Alex can be distracted from a task easily.”

He could probably scrape by for the next six decades on the compassion or pity of society. I do hope he someday has that spring in the step after a day of good work he enjoys. (Maybe calling up Elmo on an iPad?)

“Alex the Boy: Episodes From a Family’s Life With Autism” and “Alex: The Fathering of a Preemie.” Visit his blog is at http://jeffslife.tripod.com/alextheboy.

Happily Ever After?

Julia’s special interests are human sciences and learning, so she was directing her passion toward finding work interpreting neuroimaging. Now, “I’ve realized that I have an interest in how people learn,” she told me. Julia shone at her volunteer job assisting individuals with mental illnesses and learning disabilities, and is currently exploring “whether I’d like to look at the neuropsychology side or do something more practical like teaching and creating learning materials.”

Like Julia, 58% of people I interviewed felt that their dream job related to their special interests. But why aren’t bookstores and libraries warring over who gets Emma for their children’s sections? Which botanical garden will support Shay with her social and sensory issues as she contributes vitally to the organization? Adults on the spectrum need programs supporting passion-based employment.

While it may not revitalize every worker’s experience, special interest integration can be the key to happy and successful employment for some people on the spectrum. Emma’s most positive work experiences came from “having others accept my strengths and weaknesses and being able to do what I love.”

Our special interests come with positive qualities like intensity, motivation, and expert-level knowledge. Our energy and enthusiasm about these translates to job dedication. And as we bring value to the organizations for which we work, so too will we find happiness and fulfillment in our own lives.

Emily Brooks is a journalist on the autism spectrum. She advocates through her writing for broader acceptance of members of the disability, queer, and gender-non-conforming communities. Emily lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she works with children and teenagers with autism and other disabilities. For more information please visit www.emilybrooks.com or email emily@emilybrooks.com.
class projects, and discussion. Sometimes the material covered in class is not covered anywhere else (i.e., textbook, PowerPoint slides, handouts, etc.), requiring techniques to ensure all material is accessible by the student. Outside of the classroom, reading materials tend to also become more taxing, covering abstract topics that can be difficult to understand. As opposed to reading simply for content, there is an increased emphasis of being able to analyze readings. Further, while high school classes tend to provide guided questions to lead the student through the readings, college classes tend to rely on the student to identify key topics and themes.

The fundamental changes above can seem hard to manage; however, by establishing assistive technology supports while still in high school, such transitions can be managed in a much more efficient manner. Creating a course of action is important for students with ASD because environmental changes may lead to high levels of stress that can drastically affect a student’s ability to participate and succeed in the learning environment.

Below are some examples of how technology can be used to support students with ASD in the learning environment with a focus specifically on supporting students at the high school and college levels.

Tablets and Computers

With the advancement of technology, handheld computers are becoming more common. The use of these hand-held devices is slowly permeating into the academic field, finding particular use for students with ASD. Independent developers can create applications to address specific needs, but the digital aspect of reading materials is one of the most important benefits of these new devices. These devices can address fundamental difficulties a student may face, such as fine motor difficulties affecting the ability to turn the pages of a book. By utilizing a tablet, the frustration that manifests from these complications can be avoided (Stachowiak, 2010). Further, digital copies of lecture materials allow students to manipulate these notes in ways that can be beneficial. This can include, but is not limited to: increasing text size, color coding, sharing of notes, or incorporating supplemental notes or comments (Stachowiak, 2010). Digital books allow for a seamless experience for reading, allowing students to have all of their books in one place, along with supportive resources such as a dictionary, thesaurus, and online search engines.

Smart Pen

Assistive technology is extremely important for students that struggle with content heavy courses. Many times, ineffective listening skills and poor note-taking skills are the primary obstacles preventing comprehension of class lectures (Boyle, 2010). Smart Pens can be utilized to alleviate such hurdles. A Smart Pen is “a pen that contains a recording device, which when used with its accompanying notebook, links written notes to what was recorded at the time the note was written” (Stachowiak, 2010, p.5). As students are taking notes, the pen matches up the location of the notes to the time of the lecture, allowing students to review the contents of the lecture in tandem with specific locations in their notes. This allows students to supplement their notes with portions of the lecture they may have missed or misunderstood. The audio files can be transferred to the computer in order to make a more seamless experience of reviewing notes. Further, research has demonstrated that classrooms who share Smart Pen audio files online tend to have lower numbers of accommodation requests for notes and note takers (Stachowiak, 2010).

Word Prediction

Word prediction technology is found as a feature in many computer word processing programs today. These programs, such as Co-Writer, provide students with a list of up to thirty possible target words after typing the initial letters of the word they are attempting to express. This software assists individuals in the writing process by changing the concentration from the physical activity of typing to the mental activity of processing and planning, which words to use to express thoughts. The use of word prediction has led to an increase in the fluency and quality of students’ written work (Peterson-Karlan, 2011). Word prediction can support word retrieval issues, spelling difficulties, and writing breakdowns, and has been found to increase content legibility, spelling accuracy, and writing efficiency (Handley-More, Deitz, Billingsley, and Coggins, 2003; Evmenova, Graff, Jerome, & Behrmann, 2010). Additionally, the results of a study conducted by Mirenda and Turuldo (2006) found that students using word prediction software led to an increase in writing stamina and a decrease in writing frustration. By removing the distraction of spelling errors and the frustration of the mechanics of writing by hand, there is an increased emphasis on content, allowing students to maintain focus on the topic at hand.

Using assistive technology to support individuals with ASD helps to overcome the limitations that have made academic success elusive for students in the past. It is important to start using technology to support learning in college while students are still in high school, as the work is more manageable and allows time to master the technologies, leading to improved preparation for the higher demands of college level curriculum. Getting systems of assistive technology put in place as early as possible will allow for higher levels of academic independence as the road to college approaches.

Casey Schmalacker, BA, is Academic Coach and Samantha Feinman, MSED, TSSH, is Program Director at New Frontiers in Learning. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Samantha at sf einman@nftl.net.

References


programs: (a) work experiences in employment settings that take into account participants’ strengths as well as challenges, such as executive dysfunction, concrete thinking, rigidity, sensory issues, and social communication challenges; (b) self-determination competence through person-centered planning to identify work opportunities that take into account special talents and skills that may have been developed and honed to high levels through over-selective interests in specific topics (e.g., trains, cars, animals, theater, food, mathematics); (c) modeling and video presentations that take into account unique learning and behavior characteristics associated with autism (e.g., difficulty with abstract concepts, trouble with fast-paced speech, preference for well-organized visual presentation); (d) participation in individual work, cooperative tasks, and technology-driven activities that take into account learning and behavior needs (e.g., difficulty with generalization of learned information to new situations, desire to have friends but inability to take initiative or act reciprocally, difficulty understanding expectations in cooperative group situations); (e) role playing and drawing that take advantage of skills and strengths that can be used to demonstrate competence; and (f) reflection and evaluation of learned knowledge through self-assessment, involving the need to look objectively at the consequences of one’s actions and considering the interpretation of, and response to one’s acts by others.

The role of families in the employment process is essential to effective employment intervention. Adult service providers may substantially increase their effectiveness by supporting and communicating with families to help them obtain needed services, navigate the workplace, understand the changes after someone becomes an adult. Under the ADA (American’s With Disabilities Act of 1990 and Rev. 2008), all people diagnosed with ASD cannot be discriminated against during the interview process or if they disclose after becoming an employee. Unfortunately, we have members of GRASP who have experienced discrimination because of their ASD diagnosis in both of these situations. This is one of the reasons we are advocating for people to consider utilizing self-advocacy before disclosing. By finding Common Ground and self-advocating for workplace needs, the employee (or future employee) is more likely to keep her/his job and be the best employee possible.

Conclusion

By finding the Common Ground of understanding and communication with an employer and self-advocating for workplace needs, the employee can become a better worker and assist the employer in creating a successful, productive business without the need for disclosure.

For individuals on the Autism Spectrum seeking employment or who are currently employed, we suggest reading the following books: Temple Grandin & Kate Duffy’s Developing Talents: Careers for Individuals with Asperger Syndrome, Roger Meyers’s Asperger Syndrome Employment Workbook, Valerie Paradiz’s The Integrated Self-Public Policy: Transitioning: A Program for Emerging Self-Advocates with Autism Spectrum and Other Conditions, Rudy Simone’s Asperger’s in the Workplace, and Zosia Zaks’s Life and Love: Positive Strategies for Autistic Adults. If these books help, but someone is having difficulties implementing the authors’ suggested strategies, we recommend consulting a job or life coach for assistance and direction.

This article serves only as a suggestion based on our experience working with individuals on the spectrum. GRASP is not responsible for loss or termination of employment. A necessary step is the potential employee’s decision to disclose or not disclose their disability to an employer.

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